

# THE TOYFAIR

*by Neal Faasen*



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*Yes. Carry me along, taddy, like you done  
through the toy fair!*

James Joyce: **FINNEGANS WAKE**



## THE TOYFAIR





I sat on the swing right out in the open. I just didn't care any longer; let the whole school see me, I didn't care. The only thing that I cared about now was whether Worm and Ace would keep their promise. I knew Worm would. If somebody dropped a bomb right in the middle of Mr. Henry's office and blasted the school into a million pieces, Worm, if she was supposed to meet you somewhere, would be thoughtful enough to crawl out of the whole mess and tell you that she couldn't make it; that's the kind of girl Worm was, you could depend on her.

I wasn't as sure about Ace. If a person could get to heaven on his good intentions, Ace would be there all the time.

Ace's trouble was her looks, she just had too many of them and they were all good. As far as this looks business was concerned, none of us had to worry, but Ace's problem was that she didn't want hers. She would have been much happier with a good old-fashioned harelip or even a clubfoot, any of those things that make people leave you alone. All the men teachers were much too chummy and the women teachers were much too crabby to make this looks business workable. I don't think she minded having a beautiful walk (nothing like you see in movies) but that was as much of it as she would accept. The rest was just one big fat waste of time. She would walk past my desk in school and her dress would accidentally swish against my arm. This would carry to me the faint aroma of the kind of soap she used, would make me tremble because I knew that Ace wouldn't want me to think about her that way, with the funny thing being that I wasn't. She would look at me as she passed my desk with her face slightly flushed because both of us were good-looking and we were allowing each other to know it.

I don't know how it happened that Worm and Ace became friends. Worm looked as if she had just come over on a boat and was fleeing from some war. She had that displaced persons look, clean but old-fashioned clothes, straight but stringy hair (it never would stop falling into her eyes), and the pride and joy of her whole face, a tooth missing in front that some dirty German had knocked out with the butt of his gun; but she talked like an American and I guess she was.

I gave the swing a little push and lifted my feet off the ground. It's nice sometimes to have your feet off the ground, to sit with absolutely nothing under you, to push off and throw your body forward and high into the air, to kick out



at the sun, to know that you're alone in the park when everyone else is either studying hard in school, or working like my father used to do and my mother does now; just to sit there idly like any rotten kid would do. All I mean to say is that sometimes things are nice. I often wonder why my teachers hate irresponsibility; they should try it sometime before they knock it; it's a serious business.

But they hate it, they hate anything that is comfortable. It's always sit up straight in class, stop smiling and giggling (that's one of their favorites, it seems that I never have any business smiling), stop whistling in the halls, always keep off the grass, don't drag your feet; oh there's an endless amount of them. I am surprised that they can remember them all. For some strange and unknown reason my teachers believe that I am out to make fools of them. I can't imagine where they could ever get a notion like that, I just can't. They make me feel that being a boy of thirteen is about the worst thing in the world that could possibly happen to anyone. It's almost as bad as being born a Communist, and everybody knows that if you were that unfortunate, you might as well have not bothered being born, because every single second on earth is just doomed and tortured time. I know that this sounds as if I am trying to be funny, but I am not, what I said is true, I read it in our current events magazine. That's a paper we get twice a month in history class, with rotten jokes on the back.

My teachers also hint around that the only reason they even bother talking to me is that they get paid for it and that I am and always will be the subject of their infinite pity. God, with a little luck I could have been born dead. It never fails, every time they talk to me and turn on their best manners, it's a dead giveaway I know there is some-

thing wrong as soon as they use that soft kind smiling approach, there's sure to be trouble ahead. But of course they never do hit us; they haven't the guts, we could sue them for every dime they've got. In my case it's a little different. I am just the type of nasty little boy that would hit back, and that goes for the women too, bam! A bolo punch right in the stomach. School has taught me something, if you're going to hit women get them in the stomach, it's all flab, they can't take it.

If anyone were to ask me (and I don't think that anyone will, no one ever asks me anything; they know that all they will get is a big mouth for their trouble) who makes the best teachers, I will, in all fairness, have to say the old maids, the good-looking ones, that is. The ugly ones should be run against the wall and shot. I am convinced that they're leftovers from the Third Reich. The good-looking old maids are my favorites, I can usually get along with them. Most of them call me dear and they used to let me sit on their laps when I was bad, and of course I was bad all the time.

This one teacher, Miss Mumpers, had the biggest butt in the business but she wouldn't let me sit on her lap. So I wasn't bad around her. Of course she is still my favorite teacher, this year I have her for English. Miss Mumpers is old but good-looking. She has a round face and long hair with big beads around her neck. One time I saw her buying popcorn in the Regent Theater and I know that she saw me, but I never told anyone or threw it up in her face and I know she respects me for it.

Miss Mumpers looks at me all the time in English class. She is always reading some nobody poet that had died or gone blind or mad. It would make her go all to pieces, it was terrible to watch. But this one time I remember she was

reading out loud and it was autumn out the windows and the hushy sounds of the dead leaves were coming faintly through the thick glass. Something happened that day. I can still hear the sound of those damn leaves and the bird-like words that were wooing from her thick, tired lips. She just kept looking up at me as she read. I couldn't help staring at her round familiar body or the hard expression that was around her eyes; she felt it too because she was mad at me for a whole month after that, it was a funny business all right.

These old maids have such a good straight sense of reality. They always judge you only on your looks. As I said, I am good-looking and I have been known to take a bath now and again, and I do have good straight teeth. Good teeth are important. I think that my whole career as a student (and holy God it has been long) has been helped more by my teeth than any thinking ability that they say I am supposed to be born with. Every time I try this thinking business I end up with bad marks. I found out that smiling was much better.

My teachers keep telling me I have no brains. I always have no place to go, no aim in life, not even a paper route. They say I'm full of hatred and lazy, and I'm always doing and thinking the wrong things. It will just be luck if I don't end up in the gas chamber or the electric chair. They keep trying to make me take up a trade or a hobby so that my life won't be a total loss (but since they have already doomed me and sent me to hell, what would be the point?). They wanted to put me in a class repairing shoes but my mother wouldn't let them. Now can you picture that? Let's say that suddenly God would take it into his head to make me die and I would zoom up to heaven. What could I say if they

were to ask me what I did when I was around down on earth? Could I tell them that I fixed people's old beat-up shoes, or that I collected a bunch of canceled stamps, or that I cut other people's hair; just what kind of goal is that? Now if they would let me make a career out of gambling, or say, football, or even baseball, then I could go to heaven better equipped. I could tell God that I was a baseball player and if he asked me why, I would tell Him that it was a game where a speck of the universe is tossed about, and the man that can toss it farther and faster and higher is a very happy man. He would want me to be happy, I am sure of it.

That's one of the things I have against my teachers. When they ask me what I want to be I tell them that I want to be a gambler or a football or baseball player, all they do is get mad at me and tell me that I need discipline. Next time when they ask me I will tell them that I want to be President of the United States of America and they will smile and be contented, as if that's the most normal thing to be in the world. You can be President but you can't be a gambler. What kind of a world is this? I tell them that there is no harder discipline than being a ballplayer or a card shark and besides it's more exciting than what they want to make out of me. I tell you I won't sit still for it. I would rather take my little speck zooming into the sky. Besides, good-looking kids don't need an education, we're born clever.

I could easily have been the pride of some mother but I'm afraid I will never make it. I have a father that lives in Chicago and he's no good (that's what everybody tells me) so what do they expect; all the odds are against me. But I guess there's something innocent about my face. If ever I want to make a career out of shoplifting, I can't help but be

successful. I have one of those he's-a-nice-little-boy type of face that has made it possible for me and my old-maid teachers to have a standing love affair that I am sure will hold me in good stead until I grow up. Of course, that's taking into consideration that I will ever grow up and from all reports, I'll never make it. Besides, I don't think that I'll like it anyway. I won't like it if it's anything like my oldest brother. He's just covered from head to foot with hair; holy God, it looks messy. I hope I don't have to shave every day like he does. If I do I am afraid it will strain my relations with my old-maid schoolteachers, who I am sure will never forgive me. They will think that all these years I have been wearing a mask and that underneath I have always been a man disguised as a boy. They will think that I've been playing frolic with their virgin hearts. If that's the case I want to say now and forever that this is not true. I, too, take my love serious and I'll feel just as hurt and jilted as my teachers when I lose the smoothness of my chin.

I stopped the swing and noticed the little puff of dust it made. The dust filtered across the smooth plain that had been made worn by a thousand children's shoes. It settled like snow on the weak and thin green grass. I think swinging was making me a little dizzy. Usually my peanut-butter sandwiches that I take in my lunch are enough, but I didn't have any coffee with them so I lost a lot of energy there. Of course, Ace and Worm were nowhere in sight and I think that that was bothering me more than anything else. I thought that coming to the park would calm me down, would help me get all my planning together so that when Worm and Ace did come I would be ready.

A person doesn't decide to give up his education every

day in the week and he doesn't decide that he is leaving home every day in the week, and he doesn't stop caring every day in the week; so you see I had a lot on my mind to bother me.

At least I was feeling better than I did in the morning when my mother kissed and smiled me off to school. It's strange; no matter how I hurry I am usually late for school. Most of the time it's not even my fault. Dogs bother me a lot, I mean dogs I don't know. Sometimes I have to go five or six blocks out of my way just to get around them. Of course when I tell this to my teachers they never believe me. If I were a teacher and some poor kid told me that he was bothered by street dogs a lot, I would believe him, something like that just has to be true. Of course, Mr. Henry and Miss Booboo are out to get me anyway. It's a whole campaign they have going, the committee for the downfall of William Noone. They drive around together in this small German car cooking up new schemes to ruin my character, they're at it all the time. Once I saw them in the car over at Lookout Hill, just sitting there with the motor running looking over the city, it was awful. They were just waiting for me to make a mistake; how rotten can you get, I ask you, how rotten? They even have the same names for me. They call me idler and schemer, or that Noone boy. I think that they both knew my father. They were the first ones to tell me that my father was no good, and then they didn't even have enough guts to come out and say it. They had to hint around at it. It's always "What is your father doing these days, does he still have his drinking problem?" Miss Booboo teaches something called Family Living, she and Mr. Henry even suggested that my father was in an alcoholic clinic and was run over by a car when he tried to escape.

Of course, they both know that he is very much alive and that he is living somewhere in Chicago, but it's a little story that my mother is passing around these days so that her pride isn't too shattered by the fact that she married a drunkard (or if she didn't marry one, she ended up with one, which is all the same thing), but it's a hell of a thing to tell a growing impressionable young boy that his father got hit by a car while trying to escape from an alcoholic clinic, it's really a hell of a thing to say even if it's true.

I wonder if anyone can be as bad as they say I am. I realize that being an adult isn't the easiest thing in the world, but they make me feel that it is my fault. If I could help them I would, they just have to accept the fact that they never had a childhood; they better put the blame someplace else, I am not about to take it. Who knows, if they ever were my age we might have even hung around together, but I doubt it, they're both pretty short on looks (maybe that is why they act that way), and that's one thing I do insist on from the people I hang around with; they have to be good-looking. Of course, Worm is a little on the heavy side, but I think that it's all baby fat and she will grow out of it. But right now it gives her a sort of grubby look. I think that she would be prettier than Ace if she didn't have that foreign Salvation Army look about her. She's the only girl that I ever met who knows more about baseball than I do. She knows the lifetime batting average of most of the major league players as well as (and this really shook me up) when they broke into the majors and what happened to most of them after they left the majors. She has only one fault (and that's not unusual because the people I hang around with don't have many). She believes that Rogers Hornsby was a greater all-around ballplayer than Ty Cobb.

Maybe she will grow out of it, I think it's just something she's going through, you know, trouble at home and all of that.

By the way, it's this same Mr. Henry that is always kicking me out of school, and I suspected (though I don't have any proof) that it was him that was behind my track team trouble. You see I am the fastest runner in school, maybe in the whole damn city, but I have been kicked off the track team, they say because of bad marks, I am even flunking gym, but that's not the reason I was taken off the track team. Again it's my bad character and I know it. I don't play with the rest of the team—how can you do that when you're all alone out there, it's not teamwork when you lose, it's you that loses. I am without a doubt the very worst sport in the business. I once tripped a runner because I knew that he was beating me. I shout and brag when I win, and I am mean and cry when I lose, you can see, my bad character comes out all over. It's like a flood, I can't hold it back, it makes me want to kick and break things, I am totally shot.

As far as Mr. Henry kicking me out of school, that I take quite well, in fact it's the only time I am noble. I don't mind not being allowed to enter my classes but they say it's my duty to try to get back in. One time I forgot my duty for three whole weeks. I would have easily forgotten it longer but I suddenly remembered it when I was caught during school hours in the front row of the Regent Theater. Those narrow-minded school authorities sent the police looking for me right in the movie house, you would think that they would regard my feelings, but no not them. Here I was enjoying Errol Flynn in the movie *Captain Blood*. The theater was dark and quiet. There is hardly anyone there in the af-



ternoon except a few old ladies and men, a couple of businessmen hiding I imagine from their bosses, all cases like myself, derelicts unfaithful to the Space Age, leftovers from the business world, sneaks, liars, cheats believing only in the flashing screen in front of us and the darkness behind.

It was calm and nice until I heard the sound of someone beating their way towards me but I didn't look back. This someone sits directly behind me and taps me hard on my shoulder (he did it so hard it hurt) and whispers in my ear, "Is your name William Noone?" And I whisper back, "No" and he grabs me by the back of my neck and pulls me right out of my seat (and I believe he slapped me) and puts me in the back of a police car and takes me home. My poor mother is already on the porch and she is crying and looking at me as if I had a death sentence hanging over my head. I run to her and begin crying myself and tell her about the brutality of the police and asked her if she gave them permission to beat me. All it makes her do is cry more, "Oh William, William, don't you know what you're doing?", she was ready to go on saying that for the rest of the afternoon.

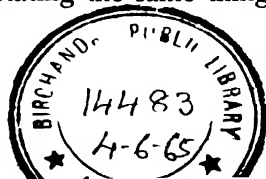
Of course my tears might have been fake but I think hers were too. She cries all the time, even when she is happy. One time I gave her a box of cherries for Mother's Day wrapped in toilet paper and she cried all afternoon. I got so sick of her crying that I told her I had stole them. If children could divorce themselves from their parents I would have divorced my mother years ago, no wonder my father left home and never came back. I don't blame him. I would have done the same long ago if the police wouldn't bring me back. As far as I am concerned, my mother is on the same side as Mr. Henry and Miss Booboo, but in her case it's not hatred you feel, it's sadness. I guess that is as close

as I can come to love, but I don't let it throw me, people like me are that way a lot, we're pretty selfish.

The police told my mother that I hadn't been in school for the last three weeks and they had just taken me out of the Regent Theater. Of course I told my mother that the police were lying, I was in school every day, she could check with Jim Rinsinback, he would tell her the truth. Jim would back me up, I knew that; I was tougher than him, besides he would do it anyway. The reason I had been allowed to forget my education for so long a time was because I had told them I was going to visit my father in Chicago. I even gave Mr. Henry a note that Ace had written, signing my poor mother's name. Ace can write like an adult sometimes when she wants to, it looks terribly official and important. It was all going smoothly until some little stool pigeon bastard saw me sitting in the park during school hours and began to check.

My mother knew I was lying so I just kept going, I told her that the police had taken me out of my gym class and actually put me in the theater and also that Mr. Henry and Miss Booboo were all in on it together. When she asked me what they all were in on I began crying too, but this time for real. I told her that she knew, and that she was in on it too and who was she going to believe, her own son or a bunch of strangers. Needless to say, my mother believed the bunch of strangers. But she did take me in her arms and began rocking me right out there on the porch for the police and the whole world to see. We were rocking back and forth with both of us crying like a couple of damn kids.

Well, it all ended up with me making a complete new set of promises and my mother making a whole new set of prophecies all of them stating the same thing, that I would end



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up like my father or even worse, that is if anyone could be worse off than my poor father. I was taken back to school (under protest I must add for the record) in a police car and everyone was kinder than they had ever been before. The only good thing about the whole affair was that I was getting the reputation around school that I was a good liar and forger, I even began wearing oil on my hair but my mother made me wash it out.

I think about my father more than what is good for me but since Worm and Ace still had not come I began to worry a little more. My father is like a ghost to me. He haunted our house days at a time but never too much more than that. I have one vague image of somebody whispering to me while I was asleep, a wet, dark breath coming down and kissing me on the lips, it was my father. It was my father before he went away for the last time. It wasn't so long ago but it seems as if it was. He climbed into his old Hudson that always sat out in the yard; and the damn thing ran and so did he. I never really minded my father going and coming but the way Mr. Henry talks about it, he sure did. He would look at Miss Booboo and say something to the effect that I was the product of a broken home, and they would give me a pity-filled look, it was sickening. It was never that way at all, I just figured that when my father took off, as he always was doing, I just had one less boss over me, and I was happy about that. To hear them talk, it was just the end of the world for me, God they can be sickening.

Getting for a moment back to this school business and letting my father lie for a while, they allowed me back in school with a long and involved warning that this was my last chance (it was my fifth last chance), yes, I was again

forgiven. Of course it was all a big bluff on their part and I knew it. The state says they have to keep me in school until I am sixteen, which might as well be eternity because I will never make it. I had been kicked out of all the rest of the public schools, this was the last one and they were stuck with me. There was, of course, a broken-down old Catholic school, but they couldn't send me there. I don't know what I was but I wasn't Catholic, so I was safe there.

Then this morning it all came on me again. I was standing in the hall between classes and suddenly I got the feeling that I had to leave again; it didn't matter where. I had the same feeling sometimes when I used to run on the track team (that is, before they kicked me off). I knew I had the race won and I was terribly disappointed, I wanted to keep on running and keep on winning. I even went so far as to slow down so that the second-place man would have a chance. It was nothing noble, it was just that I wanted to beat him again. And this morning in the hall it was that way again. It was then that I got the idea of going to Chicago and seeing my father. I was the only one in the family who knew where he lived. He had sent me a postcard on my birthday through a colored boy that worked for him when he was a hotshot salesman, and the colored boy's brother had given it to me in the park. It was a very mystical way to hear from my father and it made me happy and sad.

I thought of asking Ace to write me another note but that probably wouldn't work again, they were wise to that trick. I knew that Ace and Worm would just be going to their English class so I went to Miss Mumpers' room before the bell rang. They were there all right, sitting like a couple of scholars right in the front row. It was a funny thing to see, it almost made me laugh. Miss Mumpers had her back to the

class and was writing some more old poems on the blackboard. That woman writes more poems on the blackboard than anyone I know. She's always got that how-do-I-love-thee smile on her round face. It breaks you down sometimes to see things like that, especially when someone is old (or getting old) and kind like she is. Well, they both promised me that they would meet me in the park at noon. I just left as the last bell rang. Miss Mumpers turned around and saw me zoom out the door, and guess what, she had that same smile on her face; it must have been born there.

There is something strange about someone who is gone, even if it's only that the person is in another city like my father, you begin to think about them as if they never lived at all. You're walking like in the hall or in the park under the trees, and suddenly their face is in front of you or in front of your mind. You want to see them so badly but you don't know how. You can even remember the tone of their voice or their smile or that look in their eyes that belongs only to them. You stand there just staring, all broken down. It's like an aunt I had that died. She is gone and you know that you will never see her again, but you want to and you just can't get rid of that feeling by realizing that she's gone. You want to see her and that's all there is to it, and of course it's not enough. You just keep walking around wanting it, it's always missed, and I guess you die missing it. Sometimes I even believe that someone is stealing something from me. It doesn't matter where I am, I might be by our river or on Michigan Street, just anywhere. I feel like I've left something behind or forgotten something and I go back to the last place I was and when I get there I don't know what I have lost, but I look anyway without even knowing what it is.

So as the last bell rang I went to the boys' washroom and decided to have a cigarette. This is strictly forbidden, of course, thereby increasing the enjoyment. I am not a very good smoker, that is not as good as a movie star, but I am getting better by the hour. It helps calm me down when I have a lot of important things to do. I have a special taste for long strange cigarettes with even stranger names. I like Egyptian brands, but sometimes I go for the rougher brands like Turkish. It all depends on my mood. I have always had a weakness for Basil Rathbone and Fatima cigarettes. If you take one of them with a Coke and an aspirin it can knock you out so don't ever do it unless you want to die.

I like this one boys' room on the third floor. It's cleaner than any of the others because none of the seniors use it, those guys are real dirty. I spend a lot of time up there, I think I spend as much time there as I do in my classes. It's a real nice place. It gives you a good view of the football field and I can watch the seniors practicing. They got it soft. They even get out of school early for it, I would stay in school if they did that for me. But it was morning and no one was out there.

Another good thing about the boys' room is that the women teachers can't come in after you. It's against the law. You can sue them if they come in. So you see the law is smart enough to give us kids some protection, otherwise we would be exposed all the time to attack from all sides. Sometimes they would open the door and call into the room from the hall. Their voices were tiny and old-sounding like a weak bird calling from a long ways away. "William, William dear, are you in there?" Of course I wouldn't make a sound (I was afraid to breathe or even move), I just hoped that they wouldn't see the smoke rising above the steel

partition that was in front of the door so that the girls couldn't see in.

Let me tell you, it was a good safe place to be. I would look out the window and down at the ball field and think about my father, or sometimes about Ty Cobb. I saw a picture of him once in *True* magazine but he was pretty old then. There was a story that went along with it. It told about him sitting on his porch and how he had called to the reporter as he was leaving. He called to him and asked, "Do you think they will remember me?" and the reporter and me had both answered yes.

I could see the sky from the window and there were clouds in it and they were white and soft and calm. That was a laugh, here I was in school and didn't want to be, Cobb was old and sick all the time, my father had left and wasn't coming back, my feeling was coming on me again and this time not only for myself, and those damn clouds stayed just the way they were, God what a laugh.

I looked across the court and could see in the window where the rest of the kids were studying, I think it was Mr. J. F. K. Queens' science class. I blew out some of my smoke as a sort of signal but I don't think that any of them saw it.

Mr. Henry and his partner in crime, Miss Booboo, are always asking me what is wrong with me. I wonder how they would take it if I were ever to tell them. What would they say if I told them I wasn't interested in what they have to give me, in fact I don't believe that they're giving me anything, anything I want that is, anything that is important. What if I were to tell them that football and baseball and even when I am running means more to me, or that I see more even in a movie with Flynn or Bogart when they're fighting and smoking and ending up with a hundred slugs

because they won't change, or even my father leaving the way he did because he liked drinking and smoking his big old damn cigars more than he liked working, more than he liked us grabbing kids or his crying wife; all of that is more important, and above all I would tell Mr. Henry and Miss Booboo that I don't like them and I don't like someone asking me every time I turn around what is wrong with me.

If I am as worthless as they make me out to be, put a bullet in me and leave me alone. No, I won't tell them anything. They wouldn't put a slug in me, they would take me to the school psychologist and he would fix my wagon but good. They brought me back again but it wasn't working. I am afraid that I just wasn't made for education. There must be some people that their education doesn't fit. Cobb didn't miss it too much that I could see.

It was only ten-thirty and I had already been to two classes. That's not doing bad for me. Two classes one right after the other, that's not bad at all. I was even feeling sort of proud about that, just think, two classes in a row, damn, next time I get downtown I am going to buy myself a tweed coat and a pipe like those guys that read library books. I see them down at the library yakking all the time. I know for a fact that the reason they act so strange is because they can't get girls. I saw one try to kick a ball once, I died from laughing. The bastard missed the ball completely. So you see right there what reading those library books does for you, knocks the living hell out of your kicking ability.

My history teacher is that way a lot. He is a very short, thin man that dislikes athletes because they're so dumb and because they're always thinking about girls all the time. He's always talking about this Dutch Admiral named De Ruyter who, according to him, sunk the whole British



Navy. He hates the English and I think it's only because Mr. Henry is English, or he talks like an Englishman at any rate, but what Mr. Henry has to do with the British Navy my history teacher never explained to me. He likes me because I listen to his stories about this De Ruyter. I told him my father was a storm trooper in the German Army. I am not sure that he believed me but I got a better mark the next quarter so it did help some.

But thinking about all of this wasn't getting me out of school. You see, I would walk right out but they have what they call monitors at every door. In case anyone doesn't know what a monitor is I will fill you in. They're sneaky little rats that would sell out their own mother if she tried to get through the halls without a pass. In our school the teachers are all caught up by a new theory that us children should police and govern ourselves. It's a real democratic idea except for one thing, it doesn't work. But they're so carried away with this idea that they even have monitors in front of the washrooms, you have to sign in and out even to go to the bathroom. Right there alone you can see what trouble a person might run into. By the way they have us signing in and out of all the rooms, you would think the place was full of atomic scientists. I honestly believe that if the school burned down today, half of us would perish in the flames because we couldn't sign out fast enough.

The monitors in front of the washrooms are called privy counselors. It is also their job to report if any of us little sex fiends are wasting toilet paper by throwing it out the windows like streamers, or purposely aiming badly, or if any of us have any unusual artistic or poetic talents that we aren't expressing in our English classes. Of course I have

been guilty of all three. I was very happy when I read in *Life* magazine that a guy had written a book about an American kid who went to a military school and complained about guys just like me that wrote all over the walls. Here I thought it was a one-man revolt, and I had associates all over the country. It almost made me feel that I belonged at last to some cause. I was even thinking for a while of getting a flag but my whole campaign was smashed when Mr. Love, the janitor, caught me writing on the wall and brought me down to the office.

The privy counselors don't bother me too much because I can bribe them with cigarettes. They are little dictators and would even attempt to blackmail you when they caught you writing on the walls. All the teachers think that their new student government is working wonderful. These monitors, they're something to see. They're actually socially conscious about their jobs, in fact they're downright snobs, it is status.

I stood there still looking out the window at the empty football field. Strange how an empty field or street or bridge can send you off into silence. I still had figured no way to get out of school. Maybe I could throw myself on the mercy of the back door monitor. I could promise him two packs of cigarettes or even a dollar bill (which I could never get my hands on), anything just so they let me out.

But just then something amazing happened. Maybe God protects the fools and the thieves of the world, it's the only way I could explain Jimmy Rinsinback coming in just then. Jimmy was privy counselor of the main floor, that's almost like being a general. He even lords it over all the seniors, but somehow he rose above all this fame. He looked on his job as a stepping-stone to things higher. What he really

wanted most of all was to run a study hall, that's where all the power was. He could tell the pretty girls to shut up, even when they weren't talking. Jimmy's main trouble was that he wasn't too good-looking, but in all fairness, Jimmy took his bad looks far better than I took my good ones.

"I see you were in the old man's office again," he said as he spotted me standing by the window. We called the principal the old man, just like they do in war pictures. "What for this time?"

He was a snake when it came to asking questions. When you first talk to him you think that he's not interested in what you're doing and saying, but it's all a front. His ears would probably fall off if you failed to answer him.

He noticed as he finished his brilliant question that I was smoking. I knew that next he would be asking me for one, I had to beat him to the draw.

"Care for one?" I said pulling out an empty package that I carried for just such emergencies. He could see that it was empty, that way I didn't have to lie. With all my endless faults, I hate lying. Of course, me telling my history teacher that my father was a storm trooper in the German Army I do not consider lying. That's the kind of character my father has, or should have, anyway that's how I see him. A tall man in dark clothes smoking his damn long cigars and refusing to tell the enemy anything.

Jimmy gave me a disgusted look for showing him the empty cigarette package and began inspecting the walls. He had no authority up on the third floor, he must have done it out of habit, he was doing it sneakily too, turning his head and at the same time itching his ear, God he was a coward. At least I had got out of the question about what I was doing in Mr. Henry's office. I am good at getting out

of questions, in fact it's one of the things I pride myself on. It takes concentration and control, not everyone can do it. I am better at it than anyone in the whole school, you can shoot a direct question at me and I can get out of it a hundred different ways. One of my favorite ways is to begin coughing or quickly change the subject without anyone knowing it. If I feel real scary, I just stare at the person who is asking me a question without saying a single thing, just stare, it drives them mad and it works every time. But I have to admit that Jimmy was a real understanding guy. If he had found any new thing I might have written on the wall, he would have just rubbed it out. But I wasn't in the mood for any writing at that moment. You have to feel just so, to write a few good old-fashioned fuck-yous. It doesn't come on you all the time, only when you think of human beings.

"Did you hear about Huntington?" he asked me after being satisfied that I had written nothing on his precious walls.

Just to keep him interested I answered "No," although I knew more about Mr. Huntington than anyone in the whole school, but I had a plan for using Jim to get out of school so I allowed him to drag me into his dumb conversation.

"Well," he began as if it were a great big whispering secret, God if the world were coming to an end in the next ten seconds he couldn't be any more serious. I hate that, I hate people being serious, especially when there is nothing to be serious about. "Do you know what Huntington is trying to pull?"

He stopped, hoping that I would ask what (which I would not do). If someone's got something to tell you, well

tell you, don't make a whole conversation out of it. He was disappointed by my silence and went on.

"Well, it's all over school. Funny you didn't hear about it, you sure you didn't hear about it?"

You can always tell when someone is about to knock someone else just by the way they try to drag you into their sneaky conversation, they want to make a conspiracy out of it. The more everybody yaks about it, the bigger and more vile they hope it will become. If they happen to be wrong (which they never are) they can always say that everybody was talking about it, everybody knew it.

This thing about Huntington was nothing. Everyone was down on him because he was letting his work and himself fall apart. He is the mathematics teacher, or maybe I should say he *was* the mathematics teacher. I think what he is trying to pull, as Jim calls it, is nothing except that he wants to get out of the teacher business altogether. He likes to whittle and has become so degenerated as to do his whittling in class, in front of us students. In an age when mathematics and space and science are so important, this Mr. Huntington has taken it on himself to whittle. Sometimes he even whistles while he whittles, as if he were enjoying himself, can you imagine such a thing? He would sit back in his old swivel chair and just ignore us and whittle away, humming or faintly whistling; of course, being a bad student and a troublemaker from way back, I saw nothing wrong in this.

He isn't bad at it either. He carved an African death mask, some flying white birds trapped in flight, and the best thing of all, a huge white butterfly with soft and sleepy eyes. I don't know where he ever saw one like that. I don't think that anyone had ever seen one, not even Mr. Huntington, but he carved it and it is the best he has ever done,

and if I ever had a chance I would steal it. He doesn't talk much but one day I asked him what it was and he said, "Oh, nothing," and just kept staring at it. And just because of this they were planning to get rid of him.

My last trip down to the office that Jim had so sneakily brought up and the one that I had so cleverly gotten around was where I heard that they were planning to get rid of Huntington. That's another place besides the washroom where I spend a great deal of time. I have been known to put in a whole afternoon there without blinking an eye. It is supposed to be a punishment of some kind for my bad character because the rest of the students walk past the office and can see me sitting there. The funny thing is, I always enjoy it.

Anyway, I was sitting there waiting to be allowed to return to class after I had been absent for the last week because of "ill health." Who should come trunching in but Mr. Huntington. He's got a thin mustache over his upper lip and he looks like a fallen matinee idol. I think that he was there to pick up his morning mail and the handful of orders and statements that the old man was always handing out.

He saw me sitting there and gave me a sort of half-smile followed by a sharp and all-knowing wink. The bad part of it was just as he shot me the old flash of his right eye who should come walking out of his office but Mr. Henry. It was almost as if he had planned it that way. Maybe he knew that Mr. Huntington was coming into the office and that he would try something irresponsible like that. But Mr. Huntington had gone too far as it was, and if he had come up to me and shook my hand he couldn't have done himself any more harm. He didn't say anything to Mr. Huntington, that isn't the way the old man works, he just nodded his

head and gave me his special you-little-piece-of-dust look that I think he invented just for me, and trooped back into his office.

Huntington, in the meantime, had gotten his mail and stopped and looked out the window at the autumn for a moment, made a picking sound with his teeth, and walked out of the office without looking at me this time. I thought for a second about old Ty Cobb on his porch, about the time he was sick and drove out of the snowy rugged mountains to get some gambling in Reno. It was then that I heard the voice in Mr. Henry's office talking about Mr. Huntington.

"Well, Sam," said the first voice which I think was Mr. Henry's. "The welfare of the children is at stake." It had to be Mr. Henry's, there aren't two voices like that in the world, not alive that is, it sounds just like it came off the sound track of an old English movie. He is always talking about our benefit and our welfare. Whoever he showers with all these benefits I'll never know. I never saw any of them around, unless you can call shouting and raving benefits.

I didn't understand all that they were saying, partly because Mr. Henry's voice became muffled by the sound of the feet of teachers coming in and out of the office. I wasn't sure who the other voice was but I think that it was Mr. J. F. K. Queens, the science teacher. I had this Mr. J. F. K. Queens too at one time and he was always talking about the pitfalls of marriage. He has a wife that has sugar diabetes and I asked him one time in class if he knew about his wife before he married her. Well, somehow he found room in his large heart to despise me. It was a cluttered place to be because he despised almost everyone in the whole school, Mr. Huntington coming a close second right after me.

There is a lot of hate around our little school. You wouldn't think so, to see the old dump peeking out from under the rusty maple trees and the Michigan pines when the wind is blowing, the shadows of the trees casting black-copper light all around; the flagpole with its gold eagle sparkling on top—it looks like a shrine. But it's not like that at all. The principal hates the teachers and the teachers hate us students and we students hate each other and the teachers and the principal, and if we thought about it long enough we would hate the janitor, Mr. Love, too. But I must say that all the hate that was thrown my way was well placed because all I needed was an excuse to throw a little of it back in their faces. Without it I couldn't stand living. Try it sometime, hate someone and see how happy it makes you when they fall down the stairs or out of a tree, it's a real honest, clean, all-American feeling. Without it I don't think we could ever have built this country let alone settle the West.

There was one real advantage I had in being in the office all the time and that was that I was more or less taken for granted. I was becoming almost a permanent fixture like the lights or windows or chairs. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if Mr. Love, the janitor, came in one of these days and dusted me off, let me tell you, it was coming to that. They were already talking in front of me as if I wasn't even there. I think I could walk into Mr. Henry's office and stand right there, maybe a little to one side so that they wouldn't bump into me when they went from office to office, and no one would say a thing. I feel like Lamont Cranston, the Shadow. Anyway, this morning when I was sitting there and they were talking about Mr. Huntington, what I got out of the



conversation was that they were planning to force him to retire without having to give him the retirement benefits that he was entitled to. They were planning to put him before a committee of some kind and review his case. I would have run right to Huntington to tell him but since I was planning to do a little retiring myself, I never got the chance.

Jimmy finished his yakking about Mr. Huntington and I nodded and continued to look out the partly opened window at the empty football field. Jimmy was a bit puzzled at what I was looking out the window at, but I quickly gave it up and flicked out my Fatima cigarette. It was beginning to burn my fingers.

"Jimmy," I said turning away from the window and looking straight at him like a gunfighter, "I want you to do me a damn large favor. I have decided to give up my education for a while and I have to get out of school. With all these rotten spies at every door I will never make it. Will you help me?"

I put it in that direct manner on purpose so that if he said no it would be cold and quick.

"Sure," he said, which was even a little quicker than I had figured, but as I said, Jimmy was a pretty understanding guy, for being so homely that is.

"Do you think that you could get Mr. Love up here?" I asked him, giving no hint of my magnificent plan.

"Ya, I guess so. I'll tell him one of the faucets is broken and that water is going all over hell. That will get him up here as quick as anything."

That was true, Mr. Love was a madman when it came to wasting water. I saw him work over an hour trying to stop one stupid little drip. The sweat was pouring down his face

but he stopped it, you would think that he paid the bill, I tell you the man is insane. Mr. Love had his own little office in the basement and Jimmy gave me a tiny smile as he disappeared out the door to get him.

I waited long enough for Jimmy to get to the main floor. Just before I left the bathroom, I turned on one of the faucets in the sink and jammed it open with my foot. The water came out like a son of a bitch. That's the one thing good about our town, we have good water pressure. It's because we sit in a valley. You just turn on the water and it comes out like a son of a bitch. It was going to wreck Mr. Love when he saw all that water being wasted. I'll bet if it ran for a hundred years it might cost the city five cents.

I dashed quickly but carefully down the hall and then down the back stairs. I'll bet you're beginning to get the picture already. Here was my plan. Mr. Love would come up from the janitor's room with his big old box of tools and of course being such an important man, he will come up the front stairs. He is supposed to use the back stairs like us kids but he never does. Mr. Henry would tell him a hundred times a day. Go check the phone in Room 41 but use the back stairs, bring some light bulbs and don't forget to use the back stairs. But every time the same thing, up he would come, that's right, the front stairs. You couldn't keep him off them, he was out of his mind about those front stairs. I think he wanted everyone to know just how hard he worked. There goes Mr. Love with his tool box; Mr. Love, the back stairs, Mr. Love. Mr. Henry and Mr. J. F. K. Queens would like to get rid of him too, but he was the fastest man on a plunger that I have ever seen. So they let him get away with murder, just think the front stairs, all ninety-four of them, absolute murder.

I shot down the back stairs three at a time and waited around the front for Jimmy and Mr. Love to come up from the basement. As soon as I saw them coming, I ducked into one of the seniors' lockers that aren't in use because this same Mr. Love, this bold courageous man, was just too damn lazy to fix them. I used them to hide in all the time. I would listen to the seniors talking as they stood around or walked by, and scare them half to death sometimes by making strange noises and talking in a low, echo-filled voice. I would say things like "This is your conscience talking. Next time you are ticket taker at a football game, let William Noone in for nothing and God will reward you in the after-life." One senior caught me in a locker and hit me in the stomach because I overheard him tell his girl that she had a beautiful ass, those seniors will say anything, they're really dirty talkers. Another time Mr. Love caught me in one and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was just looking around and all he said was "Oh" and quietly closed the locker door and left me in peace. I don't think he did it to be nice, it was just that he was a little unusual because he was gassed in the First World War.

I heard him and Jimmy coming up the stairs from the basement, and sure enough they headed straight for the front stairs. Jimmy was doing all the talking. He was shooting him a line about the youth of America going to the dogs because they wasted so much water. Mr. Love was just grunting which sounded, from inside the locker, as if he was agreeing. I opened the locker door just a crack and saw Mr. Love with his big box of tools and the beat-up shoes of Jimmy disappear up the front stairs. No wonder he doesn't get girls, he was actually wearing yellow shoes.

All this wasn't a big noble act on Jimmy's part. Don't think it was, kids are below nobility regardless of what you

read or see on television. Our sensitive natures that you're always hearing about is nothing other than the fact that we are nobodies and we know it. How would you act if you were a nobody? You would be sensitive too, anyone would. Jimmy's kindness to me was nothing other than the old-fashioned fact that I was tougher than him. One time in Franklin Park, I didn't have anything much to do so when I saw him playing by himself, and the damn fool was having a good time at it too, I went over to him and began hitting him a few times just because he was smaller than me and because he was homely as hell. This was the time that he told me if I didn't stop beating him up he would telephone to God. I stopped hitting him of course and took it slow, after all, who knows. When I asked him how he did that, he told me he did it through prayer. I said, "Oh, is that all" and finished my job giving him a couple extras for trying to be so smart.

But in spite of all my harmless bullying, I think he liked me. After all, I was tough, that means a lot, let's just say the fear was right next to the respect and they were running the four-forty together. It was a toss-up who would win.

When you go into the boiler room you feel as if you are on a ship. It has handrails that just won't stop. They run up and down the steel stairs, they've even got them around the boiler. As I hurried down the stairs, I could hear the steam coming from the big old boiler. This was another of my favorite rooms, I knew it by heart. Naturally, none of us students were allowed down there. I don't know why they had that rule unless it's because it was an interesting place to be, and the teachers were always trying to keep us bored stiff. Why else would they keep us out of there, I ask you. It had a tin sign in red letters saying DANGER—KEEP

out, but the only danger was that we might enjoy ourselves and everyone knows where that leads to, you know, idleness is the devil's workshop. Keep the kids off the streets. Give them youth centers where they can murder each other in the name of sportsmanship. It sounds like a broken record doesn't it? They feed us that junk every day. Oh God, save us from becoming serious. The psychiatrists want to become our buddies. The enemy is crouching at the gate. We hate their smooth tongues, the cut of their clothes, their smiles when they see how dirty and dumb we are.

The high windows and tall boilers really made me think of a ship, and when I think of a ship, I think of *Captain Blood*, and after that, my mind just runs away. We used to have another janitor before Mr. Love but he was fired. His name was Jake but we called him Jake the Rake. He used to drink down there as well as having a locker filled with nude girls pinned on the inside door. That is, they weren't real girls, they were just pictures but they were in color. I don't know why it is, but I always get along with people that are no good. Take Jake the Rake for example. He used to let me sit down there when I was hiding out. If anyone would come in, he would let me hide in a huge desk with the top pulled down. Mr. Henry never knew that Jake the Rake was hiding me out because Jake always had this shit-ass grin on his face that made you think he was an idiot. He just looked as if he were incapable of outsmarting you. That desk he had was his own and when he left he took it with him. When you were inside, it smelled just like tobacco and my dad's old clothes that my mother has hanging in the attic. Every time Jake the Rake would see me, he would laugh. I guess he was a little crazy but I don't hold that against anyone; it's a character builder.

I would go down there in the winter when the snow was

falling out the higher windows and me and Jake would watch it. The old boiler steaming away, the white snow falling silently outside, Jake the Rake putting coal on the already roaring fire, his face becoming red and shiny; with him roaring too, but his roar was laughter. One time he told me, "Do you know what I am going to do one of these days?" He would look at me and laugh as he talked. "I am going to wait till it's colder than a nun's, well never mind, till it's cold, then I am going to open that little door and throw that red-hot stuff all around on the floor. They'll come down and see that old Jake the Rake has gone mad. I'll open those windows and let the snow in and all the steam will make your old teachers think they're in hell and they'll feel right at home." Then he broke into another fit of laughter and began winking like mad at me. He drank too, like my old man, but he never let me see it. I saw an empty bottle in that desk one time and he told me it was medicine for a bad heart. Old Jake the Rake would begin his laughing again, his face would get red and he wouldn't even have to be near the fire.

My plan worked beautifully. I made it down the steel steps and to the outer door. It was the only one that didn't have a monitor at it. If Jake the Rake had still been there, there wouldn't have been any need for all this sneaking around. He would always let me out and give me a good word to boot. "Pass on, my boy," he would say laughing, "pass on by blind Jake and be long gone."

As I made my way to the park I could still hear Jake's laughter. But it was Jake the Rake that was now long gone.

## II

Worm and Ace were standing in the tall grass on top of Franklin Hill. No one goes up there very often so they don't bother cutting it. From where I sat on the swing, they were very small. The grass around their knees made them look like they were standing in water. The wind pushed the grass back and forth like waves. I sat on the still swing and watched them. I don't think that they could see me yet, they didn't seem to be doing anything about it. They just stood there and let the green water wash around them.

I put my hands around the thick chain that held up the swing. It was cold, it reminded me of autumn. I pulled the chain in front of my eyes, trying to hide behind it, but all

I succeeded in doing was blotting Worm and Ace off the hill. I let go of the chain allowing them to come back. Lots of times I wonder why people look smaller the farther they go away from you. My science teacher told me some sort of nonsense about the optic nerve, it didn't explain one rotten thing to me.

The wind was coming over the hill now from somewhere in back of them and it caught their dresses, one pink the other blue. Then the wind changed again and the dresses settled down. It chased around up there for a while and then came running at top speed down the hill and slammed against the baseball diamond raising as much dust as Ty Cobb stealing home. It came at last to me and touched my forehead and above in my hair and fell back down my face, running lightly over my lips. It said something in my ears for a moment and then disappeared leaving my whole body filled with autumn.

Ace saw me first but didn't tell Worm. Old Worm was way off. Her eyes were looking for me by the clubhouse where they have dances on Wednesday. There was something I didn't understand between Ace and me, something as mystical as all hell. Something that went out of style with witches and pirates but came back for me when my father went away, came back when I saw Mr. Huntington's white butterfly, was with me when I used to run before they took me off the track team, is with me at night when the dark moon is running on the white water of Lake Michigan. The only other thing I can compare it with is baseball when you catch a long fly. You know everyone is watching you and cheering and that you're damn proud, but you make a secret. You pretend that it was the easiest thing in the world to do, you never let anyone know how scared you were. Well, that is what's between Ace and me. It's a long home-



run fly against the fence and I have caught it. It's an awful big thing.

Finally Worm spotted me and began waving as if she hadn't seen me around for a hundred years. I waved back because I didn't want to hurt her feelings. After all, she's just a kid and you could smash her up pretty easy, just don't wave back sometimes when she is waving at you, that's all it takes. Worm needs happiness and she's getting nothing but pushing around from everyone. Ace has sort of taken her in hand. If we don't give her all of what she needs, at least we take her loneliness away.

They left the hill and started coming near me, both of them getting bigger and bigger by the second. Ace's eyes were the first thing I noticed as they came closer to me. She had that scary look in them all the time. It's a combination of hate and nastiness and just plain wonder. If she had lived a hundred years ago, damned if she wouldn't have been burned as a witch. But you never had to worry about Ace's feelings. She was with you all the time.

"You know, the Gestapo are looking for you," said Worm as she flopped into the swing next to mine. She smelled just like green grass. Ace just stood there next to the pole that held up the swing and as usual didn't say a word. You were doing good if she was still looking at you after she came up to you. That was one of the things that she could do perfect. She could stop paying attention to you quicker than anyone I know. Right now she was looking past the clubhouse and at the fence that was around the swimming pool.

"Don't worry," I said to Ace, "they already got the pool drained." That wasn't really true, the pool was only half drained. That was the first thing I noticed as I came into the park. They were getting it ready for winter and the

water that was still in there had been there for over two weeks. It was full of rotten wet leaves and scum and branches that kids had thrown in. That's one of the only things I like about people. They like to throw things in water. You watch it sometimes. I don't care if it's a river or a lake or just a puddle of water after a rain, just watch, someone will come along and throw something in it. Kids are a little smarter than the rest. If we can't find anything to throw in the water, we just walk around in it with our shoes on. It drives mothers mad, but you can see it's the only thing to do.

I have to admit I don't understand those park people. Why do they leave the pool like that? Just sitting there for anyone to see. I don't mind people throwing things into pools but I hate to see a pool after they get done with it. It looks worse than an open wound. With all those leaves and broken glass, something should be done. If I was ever to become President, I'd make a law that all pools would have to be drained in the darkness of the night, especially those that you were just swimming in a couple of weeks back. If not that, cover them with a big canvas so that in the morning you wouldn't go out of your mind when you saw one of them. They are always trying to figure out what makes us juvenile delinquents. Well, that's one thing right there. There is nothing that upsets a kid more than to see a pool half full of rotten wet leaves. It makes you want to turn to crime, believe me.

Ace stood there next to my swing with the full weight of her body against the swing pole. She kept her eyes on the pool in silence. The wind and the afternoon sun were both in her hair, and they did nice things up there.

I had begun pushing out with my swing and Worm in hers was keeping right up with me. I swung out into the

sky and back. She did the same. Everything I did she would do. I walked the seat back until the seat was even with my armpits. Of course she did the same thing but I had the advantage of my height. I quickly pulled myself up onto the seat and the swing swept me away. The force of the swing carried me past the worn spot on the ground and over the green into the sky. I looked at Worm. She was zooming right next to my swing, keeping even with me. I went back, she went back. I pumped forward, she pumped right there next to me. There wasn't anything I could do to outsmart her. She was with me all the time with that Salvation Army smile of hers. As the swing went back and forward over the worn spot, I got an idea. I waited for my swing to pass the green and hit the crest of the hill where it shot out into the sky. I waited for the last second, when it began to go back, and then I jumped. "Geronimooo," I screamed for the whole world to hear me. It worked. She was trapped and had to stay with the swing for the return trip. She slammed her shoes into the soft sand and dragged the swing to a stop. We were both laughing, both of us laughing like a couple of damn kids.

I lay there on the ground and looked back at her. Old Worm wouldn't stop laughing and that made me laugh more. Here the whole school was studying hard, everybody else was at work and I was lying in the grass in Franklin Park laughing like mad.

Ace, of course, just leaned against the pole pretending she was paying no attention but I know that she was laughing too. She looked like a poker player with a full house, what a bluff. I lay there on my back on the grass and looked up into the sky. It was full of clouds and they were big and they were running me down.

In a way, Ace hurt me a lot. Not in what she did or what

she was doing to herself. It was what everyone was doing to her. It wasn't her fault either, she was just pulled in. Like on the beach when you push sand walls around a bug, the more it tries to get out, the higher you build the walls. Finally you just cover it up and leave it because you're bored with the whole game. They were building walls around her and she let them. She just stood there and watched. But Ace wasn't stupid, she knew why the men teachers were kind to her and the women teachers acted so cold, and she also knew that not one bit of it was clean.

We used to take the Greyhound bus out to Lake Michigan last summer when there was no school. My mother, of course, was dead against me going so far away from home (it was a whole thirty miles). Just imagine, on my own thirty miles away from home. That was bad but to think that I might possibly go with a girl, well that was just out of the question. We, me and Ace, would get around that little problem as we got around most of our problems, we lied. That might seem odd since I said I don't approve of lying, but that is all that comes out of my mouth every time I open it. Maybe I just don't like other people lying to me. Or maybe it is that when you're forced to lie, it isn't lying. Every time you talk to them, they say, "Lie to me."

We would get off at the Chicago Drive highway, the bus would stop and let us off and pull away in a fury of dust with us standing at the side of the road until it was out of sight wondering if we would ever take it all the way, all the way to Chicago. We had our bathing suits on under our clothes and as we cut through the woods to the beach, our bodies would get warm. The sun would be splashing on the evergreen floor, scattering gold coins all around. We

could hear the water long before we could see it. It sounded, I guess, like rain. Then we would reach the top of the dune and behind us was the dark woods, the road to Chicago; in front, the sky, the water, green and blue and white. Our bodies felt bigger as we made our way through the woods but when we hit the crest of the dunes, it was all downhill, it was all sand and we knew we were just two tiny figures looking out at the open sky that had white waves of clouds.

From where we stood, it felt almost as if we were above the sky. The few dark figures way down on the beach might have just been driftwood for all we could make out of them, and they could stay that way as far as I was concerned.

Under her clothes, Ace had on her red bathing suit. We would run down the hot sand to the water leaving our clothes on the dune. As we hit the water it would smash against us, all white and cool around our bodies, and absorb us as we went under and disappeared. Ace never liked coming out of the water because she had a beautiful body and people stared at her. Not just young people, men in their twenties and thirties. I told her one time that she should be flattered, she answered me too, she answered me by starting to cry. But she didn't let me notice it. She turned away and went under water. Down there you can't tell the difference.

I think that was the only time I ever saw her cry. When Ace was unhappy she would show it by getting mad. Somehow that one emotion got mixed up when she was born. I guess I am a lot that way myself because when my dog Corky went blind, we had to take him to a farmer and have him shot and I went along to watch. They told me to wait in the car but I wanted to see it all. The farmer took a gun and shot his blind head off. He bit the dust, that is, figura-

tively speaking, because he wouldn't bite anything again. He didn't have a head any longer. The farmer, who didn't even know Corky, had a couple of tears in his eyes when he saw that dead old thing kicking. But I didn't cry, it was my dog and I didn't even cry. I just looked down at it and got mad, and do you know I am still mad to this day.

Worm was crazy about Corky too. She used to hold long conversations with him. I don't know what they talked about but she got along with him better than she ever got along with anything human.

Other times, when fall was coming, the three of us would skip school to go to the beach. I liked going then because there were less people, most of them were at work or back in school. We would lie down together and sleep and let the sun warm our wet bodies. We always went a little ways into the dunes so we could have the woods and the dunes at the same time. The beach would be long and empty, the sunlight would be falling down on us and the green shadows of the tall Michigan pines that never lost their long fresh needles.

Worm and I used to run all kinds of races on the beach but because I was so much faster I would take a handicap, like holding my ankle or closing one eye. She would go out of her mind with happiness when I would trip or bump into an invisible wall.

We would fall asleep as the sun began to dry out our suits and change the color of them. The sand would blow in little ripples against our smooth tanned skin. It sure was a sad thing to see, with all three of us knowing that we would be back at school the next day.

The swing had stopped swinging so I got up off the grass leaving the clouds where they were and looked at Ace. Here

I was playing dead, but neither of them had moved. They were both tough. I was glad of that, they weren't the mourning kind.

"You know," I said, sitting back in my old seat on the swing, "I saw both of you in Miss Mumpers' class, you know that don't you, both of you just sitting like a couple of damn scholars, and old Mother Mumpers writing her heart out with some more of her poems, just think, right in the front row both of you."

Don't ever hang around with kids, they're not very interesting conversationalists. They say a lot of irrelevant things, we're good for action, but when we talk, we don't make much sense. After all, to tell someone that you had just seen them in Miss Mumpers' class when they know that already, well that's irrelevant. I do it all the time. I am one of the most irrelevant talkers that I know. Worm and I can talk for hours without saying a thing. That's one of the main reasons I like Worm, you don't have to make sense with her, she even likes it better that way. We were always saying pointless things. But it comes off pretty good if you're real serious and move your eyebrows when you talk, most people don't know the difference.

I felt a dizziness come on me for a second when I got off the grass and I thought that it might be a good idea if we went and got some nourishment. Let's say a couple of Fatima cigarettes and some black coffee. They are the best picker-ups that I know of, that is outside of a few refreshing hours of skipping school.

"Hey, you guys, let's get something to eat. I am slowly starting to die. I need nourishment," I said, getting a little excited over the idea.

"What about school this afternoon?" said Worm, looking at me with what might have been concern, I wasn't sure,

it might have been just a joke, it didn't necessarily have to be concern, usually Worm wasn't that small. I looked at her next to me on her swing. I was a little puzzled and hurt by that remark of hers but I bore up against it pretty well.

"Well, it's this way, Worm. I'm going to tell you something that I don't want to go beyond this park, I mean it's not like they have a hint of it already or anything like that, but keep it under your hat, don't breathe a word of it, play it cool. The truth is, the real truth is, I have decided to give up my education for a while."

See how well I put things? I lead people on for a few miles and then I knock them over with a massive fact, it gets them every time. Here they expect me to go on for at least another hour and suddenly I come to the point, they can't take it, it scares the living hell out of them, they don't know what's coming next.

I wasn't sure if I was going to tell them of my plan to go to Chicago and see my father. If they knew, they would both want to go, and those two wanting anything is the same as having it. But being the animal that I am, instead of thinking of the problem of explaining my planned trip and how they could be no part of it, I thought of my stomach. I thought of coffee and chocolate cake, what kind of person am I that allows my stomach to run the whole show.

"Say, what do you think about it, let's get some coffee."

Acc looked at me from the pole she was leaning against and I knew that everything was O.K. "Are you going back to school?" she asked. Already she was suspecting something. I walked over to her and gave her a punch on the arm, not too hard, just to let her know that I was around and that I was thinking of her.



"Well, it's this way. You see if I go back this afternoon they will ask me what happened to me this morning and you can't tell them that you were sitting on Franklin Hill all morning or that you were watching the pool being drained or that you were sitting here swinging and just wasting your whole damn youth. You can see that that would be difficult. I don't feel like spending another afternoon sitting in the office trying to explain that I just quit." There, I told them that much. I wasn't going to tell them the rest.

She took my punch nicely. It was just hard enough to hurt. I wished that what I was saying would be as easy for her to take as that punch. There was something in my voice that was as conspicuous as all hell, something that made her sure I wasn't telling all. She knew that it was more than me giving up my education, but she wouldn't say anything unless I did.

"Look, Ace, I know what you're thinking, but you can't, you just can't go with me to Chicago, or you either, Worm, you won't fit in my plans, it's a rough town, it's no place for a couple of kids. Alone I have a chance, but together we wouldn't make it to the city limits. You seem to forget that it's a school day and the streets are loaded with cops. I am just saving you the trouble of asking to go. Move out, both of you. You'll be late for your afternoon classes. Besides, I don't have any money."

"We have," said Worm calmly. "Don't we, Ace?"

Worm looked past me from her swing at Ace who was staring at me to beat hell.

"Damn it, Ace, stop looking at me. I don't want you to look at me." I was terribly upset. I turned my head towards the pool but it didn't help. Both of them kept right on

staring at me, they just wouldn't stop. "All right, keep it up. That's the quickest way I know to get absolutely nowhere. This muscle stuff never works with me and you both know it."

I guess they knew nothing of the kind because they wouldn't take their rotten eyes off of me. I just couldn't let them come with me. Anyone could see that. Chicago is a rough town. They have both been to movies, they know what it is all about.

I looked out at the street and at the houses that faced into the park. Some of the kids that were in my classes lived in a few of them and it was close enough to school for them to go home for lunch. I saw Dudley Kilgallen coming out of his house sucking on something yellow and round. He was already starting back to school, he must have finished whatever it was that he was eating because he tossed it into the street and began running. He was on the track team too, but I was a lot faster than him, but I had bad marks and my bad character so he was the fastest one on the team. I hope we never meet in a dark alley sometime because only one of us would come out alive. He's on my personal list of the ten most-wanted men.

"Hey, you two guys better move out, no sense in all of us being late." I thought that would get them going, but Worm took that little piece of logic and cut it in two.

"How can you be late if you're not going back?" She was watching Dudley Kilgallen running and didn't look at me as she spoke. "Besides, Ace and me can get all the money you want in five minutes, come on, Ace, we don't need this rat."

"I am not a rat," I shouted, "you know that, you both know that I'm not a rat." I hate anyone calling me that,

Worm or no Worm, call me anything you want but don't call me a rat, that's one of the names I use on everyone I hate.

"He is not a rat," said Ace softly, "do not worry so much all the time, we are all going together."

The sound of her voice was like warm cool water, it came over me gently, it made it impossible to fight back. Ace knew we were all going together, she knew it all the time.

### III

We decided not to stop at Worm's house because it would just be yelling and trouble; besides, she slept a lot at Ace's house and all she needed to go to Chicago was over there.

Worm's house was the most unusual house I have ever been to. It is full of screaming crying kids, steam and potato soup, giant cockroaches and other bugs like her father whom she calls the dirty German. Her brothers and sisters were small and cheating and selfish, I don't know why they bothered living unless it was to torment each other. Worm was boycotting everybody in her family. She told me that she had said to her father that morning before she went to school, "I am not talking to you this week and I am not

sure if I will ever talk to you again.” Her father had answered her the way he answered almost all her questions. He gave her a whack on the side of her face which she probably took without blinking, which only made her father madder yet and he beat her with his fist as if he were some type of prizefighter. But she still wouldn’t cry, wouldn’t blink an eye, her hatred was too strong or if it wasn’t hatred it was an absolute indifference that made her take it all.

She stuck to her family because it was all she had, I guess. She would hardly ever talk about them, and the only reason we found out about her dirty German was because once he knocked out one of her beautiful front teeth.

Sometimes I think about all our futures, for me I see nothing but the looming gates of prison, everybody says so. For Ace I see something I don’t want to talk about, and for Worm, she will marry for love and end up on the back of a motorcycle and get beat up a little more than she is now. Worm is always looking for my dog Corky and I can’t make her understand that he is dead. She says that he is somewhere in the universe barking at God and chasing all the cars that shoot past our house, the way he always did on earth. I told her I didn’t think cars went to heaven, and she asked me how did I know, and I said I didn’t, and that settled that.

So we headed towards Ace’s house. They were rich and lived in a huge house on East Street, that’s where all the rich bastards in our town live. We were going to Ace’s house and it was during school hours. I was sort of curious what Ace would say when we all came tramping in.

“It all depends on whose car is home,” she said as we crossed the street just outside the park. “If it’s the Buick,

it's Dad, then we are safe. It means he is home from the office which means he is not feeling good which also means he has been drinking, and his hands shake. He's all right, he won't think there is anything out of place. If I told him that there wasn't any school today because it's Tuesday, he would accept it, Dad's all right. But if it is the Cadillac that means it's Mother, there we might have a little trouble. I will tell her I fainted or something and you two are walking me home. She won't believe it but who cares."

We made it to the corner and turned up East Street, there were trees there and they were beginning to drop their leaves. In a way that was good, it muffled our walk as Ace's house loomed into sight.

What Ace had said about her parents was all true, her father was as big a lush as my old man with the only difference being he had dough so he could get away with it. When my dad was drunk he would begin shouting and abusing people on the street. When Ace's father was drinking he would just sink into one of his expensive chairs and stare at the four walls, or if he was way out on the deep end he would stare at some stupid old Dutch painting that cost him plenty. Ace's father was a doctor but he never did a thing, that is if you don't count officiating at the track meets. He did take an interest in sports and would judge meets and referee football games. He was the only person outside of myself that thought I got a raw deal by being kicked off the track team, that is, the only other adult.

I have to admit that I liked Ace's father better than I did her mother. Her mother was a tall slim good-looking woman that carried about ten pounds of jet-black hair on the top of her head, you wondered when you saw her what was keeping it up there. She also had another bad thing about her that I didn't like, she read books all day long. Of

course that's not so bad if all you do is read, I have heard of people doing strange things with their time, the lady down the block from us washes and combs her hair all day long and I know another guy that collects stones. But Ace's mother always talks about the beauty of books or the loveliness of beautiful things, I saw one of her books once and it didn't seem so beautiful to me, in fact it looked downright stupid.

Ace's mother was boring, her thick voice would fill the room and your ears with a bunch of writers' names and I will bet you ten to one that not one of them is alive today. They're all dead, I know it for a fact. Have you ever heard about anyone writing a book that lived to tell about it? We had a teacher that wrote a book and six months later he dropped dead, no reason, just dropped dead. Every time I ask Miss Mumpers about some poet that she has written on the blackboard, I always get the same answer, Oh! he died, or he went mad, or he got killed in a duel, and when she gives you these little jewels of information, you hate like hell to interrupt her because she seems to be enjoying herself so much. That is one thing school has taught me, don't write library books, you end up the same way.

Ace's mother always cornered me in her living room (it looks more like a department store window than anything anybody lives in) and tried to talk to me about books, the French school compared to the Russian school, sure, sure, I don't even know where they are. Watch out for good-looking women that read books all day and talk about Russian and French schools that don't exist, they are up to no good.

One time I came in to wait for Ace so that we could walk to school together. I thought the place was empty and I saw her mother sitting reading one of her old books. I pretty nearly dropped dead. When you think a room is empty

and you walk in and find someone sitting there calmly reading, it makes you scared and mad, you figure that they have no business there, after all you didn't think that they were there. What business do they have paying no attention to your thinking even if it is their own house.

"Hello there," she said to me in her husky voice that sounded just like one of those sickening beautiful women that are always trying to make Errol Flynn give up the sea.

"Hi," I said, flopping down in one of the chairs that no one was supposed to sit in, just to show my contempt for her. That might sound like a lie, but it is true, she actually has some chairs that no one was allowed to sit in. I never found out the reason for this, maybe the chairs were cursed or something and she was trying to protect us, of course when she wasn't home, Ace and I sat in them all the time so it couldn't have been that.

"I believe you are one of my girl's little friends," she said, smiling with that antique-shop smile that made you absolutely despise her. Who else could I be, some rotten stranger off the street; besides I wasn't that little, I was taller than her. She set down the book that she had been reading on a little coffee table that was covered with tiny cups, just think a tiny table covered with useless little cups all different colors, doesn't that just about break you up?

I decided to use my staring method, it makes you look as if you know what the whole world is about, so I just pushed my eyebrows down and stared.

"Are you in one of my little girl's classes, how nice." She said how nice as if she were talking about a new piece of furniture. Besides, what kind of a woman was she, where did she get off asking a question and then answering it herself.

I threw one of my legs over the arm of her unsittable



chairs and looked at the book she was reading. The title was *Days of Pleasures and Regrets*. Just as I thought, she was a sex maniac. Find a woman that was good-looking once, turn her husband into a drinker who is never home, give her a bunch of books to read and finally slap a lot of expensive furniture around her house and beads around her neck, and you'll have a sex maniac every time.

"Do you read, young man?" she asked when she saw me pick up her rotten book. So far she was doing all the talking, she probably would have enjoyed the conversation a lot more if I wasn't even around. But I thought that question deserved an answer, I just couldn't sit there and be insulted.

"Not if I can help it," I answered, putting as much natural tone in my voice as she had put in hers.

"Oh, that's a shame, don't they have a reading list in school?" Of course I didn't answer her, why should I, there wasn't anything I liked about her, why not let her know it.

"Are you afraid of me, young man?" Like all women, all she did was talk. Again I didn't answer her. She was a stranger to me and I didn't quite know how far I could go with her. I knew Miss Booboo's and Mr. Henry's breaking point and would seldom go beyond it, those two were capable of anything, even murder. I think she hated me because I was slouching in her favorite chair. What the hell, if she didn't want anyone sitting in her crummy furniture why didn't she hang it on the wall or lock it in the closet. Then she could go and look at it all day and just drag it out when her literary club came over.

But she smiled and controlled her hatred, she was getting ready for a new approach. People who read do that a lot, they will not come right out and club you on the head, they

will try to out-think you and put you in the grave with a few kind words. She began talking again.

"If you are in Ace's classes, you must do some reading. Don't you read Mark Twain, surely you must of heard of him?" She was so hopeful now that she zoomed her whole face into a sickly stupid smile.

"How much would you bet," I said. "If I catch any kids reading books on their own time, I get them after school. If you're forced to read out loud in class, that's one thing, but to read on your own time, well that's for ugly kids, I bop 'em, but good." That sort of got her right in the old pump.

"Young man, you're being very vulgar. It's quite true that youth shouldn't be wasted on children."

"I bet Mark Twain said that," I muttered.

"No," she smiled as if I was too stupid to be living, "it was G. B. S." GBS, what's that, a formula, I'm sure it was dumb old Twain. "Now if you were my son . . ." If-you-were-my-son were the magic words. I just got up and went out of the room where I wouldn't find all this static. A moment later Ace came out, all she said was "I am sorry."

We got to the house and saw that the Buick was in the drive. "Good," said Ace as she walked into the house, "it's only Father." The first thing I notice when I go to people's houses is their smell. Every house smells different, some good but most pretty bad. In Ace's house there was nothing, not even the smell of wax or Roman Cleanser. It was just rich and clean and silent as a tomb.

"I think that Daddy is in the living room. Do you want to come up to my bedroom with me and Worm?" she asked.

"How long will it take you?" I said.

"Oh, the bigger part of ten minutes," tossed in Worm and they shot up the stairs and were gone before I could have answered no.

Ace knew I didn't like her room. It was sissy as all hell, it had dolls and lace and blue walls and slop like that. It looked more like a doll's bedroom than a living breathing girl like Ace. Ace had nothing to do with it, it was her mother at work again. Ace just slept there, kept her clothes in the closet, and looked out the window sometimes, the rest she ignored. She never touched the dolls or did anything to change the room. She didn't even as much as tack up a picture. If Ace were to die tomorrow you couldn't tell that she had ever spent a night in that room. It was just another one of her mother's creations. She used to take her literary club up there to show them around her beautiful house, she'd even pull that trick when Ace was in there. She would open the door, and say something like "This is my little girl's room, isn't it lovely?" The only reason she called Ace her little girl was that she had forgotten Ace's name a long time ago. Ace wasn't her real name, but it was the one she liked, so that was the important thing. The name that Ace's mother gave her must have been something out of a novel or one of her fashion magazines.

Worm came back to the top of the stairs, and looked down at me and said, "Ace says that if her father tells you what a great man he is, don't disagree with him, we don't want any more trouble than we already have." She gave me her displaced-person smile and zoomed back to be with Ace.

I walked into the living room and noticed right off that all the drapes were pulled across the afternoon windows. This was so the sun would not harm the furniture, good

God, what the hell could a little sunlight hurt. The colors were so damn soft and light as it was, that it would be impossible for them to become faded, everything was light brown and tan, it looked all the same color to me, but I have it on firsthand information that the room is balanced in an anatomical parallelism. I don't know what that means, but a Persian rug was paid \$2,000 to have the room "done." In case you don't know what a Persian rug is, that's Worm's name for a sissy-acting man. It took me a second to get used to the change of light in the living room, I had just come in off from the street, and out there the sun was blazing to beat hell.

Ace's father stood with his back to me in front of the record player, shifting records in his hands. He looked first at one side and then the other. I don't think he heard me coming in because the music that was playing was loud and he was humming on top of it. I could have run a steam-roller in and he wouldn't have noticed the difference. So I flopped down in one of the chairs that you weren't allowed to sit in, and just enjoyed myself for a second. It was a peach-colored chair, the prize of Ace's mother's collection. God, what an experience.

I said before that I enjoyed thinking I was Lamont Cranston, the Shadow, every now and then. So when I came into the living room and saw Ace's father standing with his back to me, it put me in the mood for being the Shadow. How nice I had slipped in, I just sat there and watched him knowing that he couldn't see me. It's been one of the most important things in my life, I have always wanted to be invisible.

Ace's father was a tall lean drink of water who always wore go-to-hell clothes. Thick tweed suits and calm cool

ties, the old bastard was made for the foreign service. He is the type of guy in English movies that acts like a diplomat, but when you get a few drinks into him he will dance like a boogie and jump over chairs in his expensive pointed shoes. He had a huge collection of records that he got when he and his wife were in England. They were all that classical shit, you know, nothing but horns and drums. He didn't have a single record by Hank Williams or Bunker House Johnson, so you can see that he was rather limited. Every time he and his wife went to Europe (and they usually dragged Ace along), they always came back with their suitcase full of junk that they had picked up there. Ace's mother even picked up an accent, I don't know how much they paid for it but like everything else it was expensive as hell.

I finally gave out with a mysterious hum which did nothing for me, Ace's father didn't budge. So I tried my long echo-filled laugh like Lamont Cranston: "Hahahahahahahahaha, this is William Noone, the Shadow, don't forget, the Shadow knows, haaaaaaa." Old Ace's father, diplomat to the end, just turned his head and smiled. He wasn't even scared. Maybe it was because he had been drinking and the surprise and fear that he might have felt hearing my voice was caught somewhere in his body and drowned in six-year-old Canadian Club. He turned around slowly with one of the records in his hand and gave me a glassy smile. I think he was smiling because I was sitting in that chair. Anyway I gave up being invisible and smiled back. "Care for a drink?" he said, holding up his glass for me to see, sure enough it was a drink.

Already you can see why I liked him. He didn't treat me like I was some bummy old child. He never came across

with this my-little-man business or you-sweet-little-boy junk; for being a rich doctor, he wasn't a bad human being. He would even offer me a cigarette now and then. They were those weak English brands that his wife kept in a little box on the coffee or tea or whatever the hell type of table it was. I could sit around him and not feel that I had to talk or that he was doing me a huge favor by talking to me.

"I will take a Coke if you have one," I said, I would have asked for something stronger but after all I was just a kid, and he had to watch out for the Gestapo too. I do most of my heavy drinking when there are no adults around, Ace and I and Worm can enjoy it more that way.

"One Coke for the Shadow coming up," he said, as he disappeared into the kitchen. I took out my Fatima cigarettes and lit one. Cokes and cigarettes go together pretty well, they are good for you, they help calm you down. I heard the refrigerator door slam and he bounced back in with a Coke in his hand. He gave me the bottle without pouring it into some stupid glass like his wife would have done. God, it's nice to know that you are back among human beings again; it's a big change after facing Miss Booboo and Mr. Henry.

Ace's father went over to his records and turned his back on me again. I slid down into the peach chair and let my head rest against the back. For the first time that morning I felt that it was safe to close my eyes. Slowly I let them fall shut and bring a midnight darkness to the room.

I could hear the click of the record player in the darkness. As I said, his taste for music was not the best in the world but sometimes you don't mind those big orchestras with their horns and drums blasting all over the place. He was playing the kind of music that would lift you, off the

ground, that is. I know it drives his wife crazy and he never plays it when she is around. I think it is the only reason he comes home early in the afternoon from his office; just so he can play his loud music and be alone for a while. I really don't think he likes his wife, I might be wrong there, but it seems to me he smiles too damn much when the old girl is around, no one can be that damn glad to see someone, no one.

The drums came first, followed by the French horns, I took a swig of my Coke, it was cool against my dry lips, I felt calm and safe behind the darkness of my eyes. It reminded me a lot of the music you hear in the park in the summer. They have concerts there, to keep people off the streets, I guess. The only reason I went was because the music was so loud. It was the loudest music in town, you couldn't even turn up the radio that loud. Before my brother went into the Navy, we used to go to them all the time. We would sit in the front row right on top of the damn music, you could shout at each other, and not even interfere with the 'concert. I believe it was the all-American music of John Philip Sousa. The only reason I know anything as long-haired as all that was because they made a movie of his life with Clifton Webb. Don't kid yourself, the Germans don't have anything on us when it comes to good war music. If I ever get shot down while serving my country (and it does not seem likely because as I said I will be an international spy to the highest bidder) there is no better music to die by than "The Stars and Stripes Forever," no wonder the Germans lost the war, anyone would.

Maybe I like that loud music because it was playing the last time I saw my father, or at least the last time I saw his old Hudson. My brother and I were in the park sitting in the front row with the music driving our ears just mad. I

had my eyes closed that day too, I close my eyes a lot and I swear that when I get old enough I am going to wear sunglasses all the time. My mother won't let me wear them now because she says that it is undignified and only actors do it. Well, I am willing to be undignified, shades tone down the harshness of the world and make it something secret and dark.

There I was sitting in the park with my eyes closed, the music was so loud that it was hurting my ears. Suddenly my brother begins tugging on my arm. I open my eyes to see him pointing his finger out of the park and trying to say something. He was sitting a little bit in front of me and the band pavilion looked like a giant white seashell all lit up, the light just shot into the dark night around it. I didn't hear what he was saying, but I caught the word father above the booming and blaring of the loud music. I turned my head to see what he was pointing at and saw my father's broken-down Hudson turn down Franklin beating its way at top speed toward the Chicago Drive highway where the moon sat big and bright on the horizon. It was going, you could see that there was no stopping it, it shot around the curves as if it meant to straighten them out. That old beat-up car was going fast, so fast that I thought that it was just a ghost zooming out there in the darkness. The loud music of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" was chasing it with a trail of cold dust into the moon.

I opened my eyes and Ace's father had moved, he was no longer by the record player but was sitting in the chair across from mine. It was another chair you weren't allowed to sit in. This music was making us both bolder than hell. He was looking up at his painting over the fireplace.



The painting was supposed to be by some mad Dutch guy. There wasn't much there to interest anybody, it was nothing but a messy smear of color that looked like a bunch of suns. Even the green grass (I think it was grass) looked like tiny suns. I see things like that too but in my case it's the liquid circles that sometimes fall past my eyes. When I was really young, I used to think they were round ghosts.

I had my doubts about that guy who painted the picture. Ace told me that he had cut off his ear, and that didn't sound like a Dutchman to me. To do something like that takes imagination, the guy was probably Russian or Greek, those bastards do things like that, you hear about it all the time.

Worm had said one day that she liked the picture because anyone who cuts off his own ear can't be all bad. She also said that she knew a guy named Red Mike but it doesn't have anything to do with that painting. Every time she talks about the guy that cut off his ear she talks about Red Mike. She connects it somehow, but I don't make Worm explain herself, she's too happy to be the way she is. One thing about Worm's mind, it is always working. Once she came up to me and asked if I wanted to see some old people and I said why not, and damn if she didn't lead me down the block and pointed out some old people. Sure enough, there they were, two old people walking big as you please right down the street, they even had umbrellas. Worm stared at them with pure fascination. She was a little hurt that I wasn't moved like she was, but I told her that she probably felt deeper than me, and that made her happy all over again.

Ace's father had forgotten all about me and was just staring at his painting. In one hand he held his drink and in the other between his fingers a cigarette was standing straight up and it had an ash that was long and white and

drooping over like the leaning tower of Pisa. I just kept looking at the ash waiting for it to fall on the rug. You could see that it would make a hell of a splash, but it didn't fall, it just held on, pointless and stupid. The music and the cigarette smoke was all around, making the room look like it was in a fog. While the music played, he took sips out of his glass but wouldn't take a puff of what was left of his cigarette. He just kept his blue eyes fixed on the painting over the fireplace.

Ace's father was always setting records for being silent. I think today he was trying for a new world record. He had that same look in his eyes that Huntington had when he was looking at his white butterfly. It's strange and it makes you strange. It made me think of being kicked off the track team by those rotten bastards at school. Old man Henry might get me kicked off the track team but he could not take away the fact that I did win, I have won for eternity, it can never be changed, I am the fastest guy in school and that cannot be taken away from me, no matter if next year someone beats me out. Well, I won't be around to be beat out, and that alone should get a few people upset. They are not going to see me get beat, I will disappear a winner. It used to make me mad when I was running to know that Cobb or Flynn were not watching me. I was just winning for a junky school that didn't care if I was alive or dead. My crying mother and my sloppy brothers could cheer in hell, for all I cared, I wasn't running for any of them. It was all for myself and for Cobb and Flynn and my drunken old man that everyone was down on. If I thought about it long enough, I might even have a little running room for Ace's father and Mr. Huntington and enough left over for Lamont Cranston, the Shadow.

"Do you know what the problem is?" said Ace's father, finally breaking the attempt at a new world's record. He got up and refilled his glass with whiskey that was in one of those expensive glass decanters they had bought in England. I could see that he was getting ready to give me some advice. When people want to give kids advice, they beat around the bush all day before they spit it out. But I didn't mind so much the advice that Ace's father was always throwing around.

"I know what my problem is, I just haven't got any business breathing." I smiled to myself but not to him and set my empty Coke bottle on the thick rug.

"Nope," he said, cutting the word off like a cowboy would do. "Nope that's not it at all. The world's going crazy. My neighbors hate my guts because I don't keep after my crabgrass. My God! I wouldn't be surprised if next Easter somebody produces a Passion Play about litterbugs. I tell you, William, it's coming to that."

He made a gesture with the hand that held his cigarette, his hand came up over his face as if he meant to take it off like a mask. The white ash fell off his cigarette, and fell down the front of his suit, it made a horrible smear that upset me. Why do things like that have to happen? The ash could have fallen on the floor or held at least until he found an ashtray.

I stared at his face. You could see that he was once a handsome bastard even though his face looked sort of worked over like a prizefighter. No matter what had happened to his face, you could see he once had it. Of course, when you're thirty or forty it doesn't matter any more, when you are that old, what's the point of living.

Out of the clear blue Ace's father suddenly said, "You are

just too young and full of life. You were kicked off the track team not because you're stupid but because you're good-looking and you act how your looks tell you to act." He finally noticed the ashes on his vest and began brushing it. He brushed like mad, but instead of it coming off he just smeared what was there. You would think that a man with his education would be thoughtful enough to first set down his glowing cigarette, but he didn't. In fact that was the hand he was doing the brushing with. All he did was smear it, and add a little more, the man had all kinds of trouble.

He was pretty stoned, but what he had said about me being good-looking was true enough, he was wrong about me not being stupid though, I really am. I can look at a simple math problem and stare at it for hours and never get it, they keep telling me not to give up, but just staring at it doesn't help. I can't really spell either, and every time we have a test in English, I try to bluff it, and I know that this is stupid, either you know the word or you don't. How in the hell do you bluff it, but I try. I go into a big act about how the correct spelling is right on the tip of my tongue. I would tell my English teacher that I was up all night studying and that I knew every word on the list, but now I had suddenly forgotten them. And I'd stamp my foot on the floor as if I were blaming it for me being so stupid, actually I have never studied in my life. Oh sure, I would take every book home from school every night and on the street I looked smart as hell. But the books would sit unopened and in the morning, I would pick them up and march off to school confident that I could get straight A's that day. I overheard a teacher say one time to another, "There goes poor William, he studies so hard. It must be his home life, you know, his father and all." Home life, hell; it was my movie life.

Tarzan and Randolph Scott just happen to be a little more interesting than some damn sonnet on someone's damn blindness. I know a lot of blind people and they are not writing any damn poems about it. They are doing what every hard-working blind man should do, they are out living off the state.

Ace's father had given up on the ashes on his vest, and began talking again. "Your hair is too thick and your eyes are too dark, and I need another drink." There was whiskey in his voice, and it seemed to add age to it. He sounded almost like an old man, and though he was old, he wasn't that old. I wanted to tell him that I had just given up my education and I was about to give up this town and visit my father in Chicago, but I thought of something else to ask him.

"Did you know my dad?" Ace told me that they had gone to school together when they were both young men.

I waited a second as he thought about my question and I watched his face above the glass of whiskey. I tried to put him back into his childhood, but it was hard to do. He still had most of his hair, although there were lines around the edges of his eyes, and his cheeks were heavy. Even with all that I couldn't put him back into his childhood. It's only the people like Mr. Henry and Miss Booboo who keep saying that looks are not important. You might think that I talk about looks too much, but you see it is the only thing that I have to go on. If I don't like a person's face, I usually don't like them. I can't look into people and see the "inner worth" like Mr. Henry says he can do. All I have to work with is what I find hanging around on their faces.

Ace's father still hadn't answered my question, but I sat there knowing that sooner or later it would sink into his

whiskey-filled mind that I was waiting for an answer. His eyes were heavy and they had a nice glassy look in them.

"Oh yes, your father, I am not sure, I remember a William Noone who was a pretty good halfback, but he dropped out of school because a girl took it on herself to get in trouble. . . ."

"Was the nail missing on his right toe?" I quickly asked.

"I don't know about that, but it could have been." His answer was serious, and at the same time, he put his feet right up on the coffee table. That little move in itself must have rubbed out at least a hundred polishes that his wife had given it.

"All I know," he went on feeling proud of what he had done, "he was the best place kicker I had ever seen, and yes, come to think about it a pretty good broken field runner too." He nodded his head up and down while he talked to show he was agreeing with himself.

"As good as Jim Thorpe was?" I asked excitedly.

"Well," he said dragging out the word in a hideous doubtful tone. "Maybe not as good as Thorpe, but out on the field he could make Thorpe a little nervous." Suddenly he changed the tone of his voice, it became loud and harsh. "The trouble with this house is that there isn't a damn seat that you can sit on, and the footstools are too high." He took his feet off the coffee table and went back into the kitchen after some more ice.

"Do you care for another Coke," he said through the kitchen door, "or do you want something with a little smile in it?" His voice had that normal glassy sound back in it again.

"Well," I shouted, so that he was sure to hear me, "I wouldn't hold it against you if, when you weren't looking, someone was to accidentally . . . yes I do."

I heard the refrigerator door slam again and then it was silent for a moment. It was so quiet that I thought he must have climbed in and slammed the door behind him. I was beginning to feel happy for him when I saw him coming back from the kitchen with two drinks in his hand; so I was wrong about that. He set mine down, and went back to his record player.

I wondered what was keeping Ace and Worm, in between our talking I could hear them walking around up there. It was nice to know my father was good in football. I thought so. That is where I got my speed. The part about the girl I am sure wasn't true. Girls are troublemakers from way back; there is this one girl, Sherry Van Goodwin, who took my hand one time and put it on her knee. But I stopped that real quick. I put my death-grip cobra hold around her neck and she never did it again. You have to watch these girls all the time, they will do anything; I would have told on her, but no one would believe me because Sherry gets some of the best marks in school.

I took a swig of my drink. It was real strong, he must have dipped the cork in it. See, after all, Ace's father was gutless. He could have given me a real drink, Jake the Rake would have.

"How about some jazz?" he asked as he turned on the record player that had stopped when he went into the kitchen. He kept his back to me while he talked because he was going through his record collection trying to find something that I might like. I think he knew I didn't care too much for what he had been playing. As he talked, his voice bounced off the wall to me, and again it sounded different as if the wall was now soaking up his whiskey.

"I heard some Spanish music once," I told him. "You know where everyone is shouting in the background."

"I have *Bolero*," he said, putting it on his player. "Would you like that?"

"What does it sound like," I asked, "do people shout in the background?"

He took a giant swig of his drink and answered, roughing up my hair with his hand. "It sounds like a conquering army and a tiger ripping off your ear." He laughed and I was scared for a moment, I didn't like that laugh, it even made me not like him. The music wasn't the best I had ever heard, it was just the same tune over and over, but I have to admit it was getting good and loud.

Ace came down the stairs followed by Worm who had a small overnight bag in her hand. Ace beckoned to me from the dining room. She did it in such a way that I knew that she didn't want to see her father. I didn't think it was exactly the thing for me to leave right in the middle of the record that he was playing for me. I looked over at him, he sat with his head on the back of the chair and his feet straight out in front of him. His eyes were fixed over the fireplace at his old Dutch painting. He looked asleep, but he had forgotten to close his eyes. I got up and said good-by over the music that was getting louder by the second, but I don't think he heard me, I don't think he even knew I existed.



## IV

You can plainly see that I have been abused, misused, kicked in the face, and loved. All of it resulting in this bitter selfish punk that you see before your eyes.

But I figure that I am not doing so bad considering what I had to work with. You see, I personally believe that the men in our family have been cursed by gypsies, there can be no other explanation, there are just too many coincidences for me to believe otherwise. Of course I realize that being Dutch is my greatest handicap, but all these things that have been happening to the men in my family can't be blamed only on that, someone has tossed the evil eye on us somewhere along the line.

If you have never met anyone that was Dutch, let me tell you you haven't missed much. All the history books say that they came here because of religious suppression. That's true, but they don't tell the whole story. The religious suppression they are talking about was that the Dutch who came here to settle this dumb town were bastards and people in the old country got sick of them so they told them to go to America where they would have religious freedom. So that's just what they did, they came over here, and became religious bastards. They had so many freedoms when they came here that they set their part of the human race back a half a million years, it's really terrible to see. If you ever get up to Michigan you should come and visit my town but don't get too close because someone might practice some religious freedom on you and you will end up dead, or worse, you will become converted to Calvinism. Then you can practice religious freedom on your enemies too, it's just great if you're on the right side, but if you're like Worm and Ace and me, well you would get better treatment in a concentration camp. At least there they kick you to death to your face.

Yes the Dutch are great all right. I think that it took the Germans just six hours to overrun the whole country. It was hardly enough time for the Queen to escape to save her people, as she herself said, though it is hard telling how a person can save her country from a thousand miles away. My mother said something about how the Queen had to retain an image. The Queen did all right, she disappeared but fast. There was one King that lived in Denmark or Sweden that didn't run. When the Germans came and began taking the Jews away, he calmly said that from that moment forward he considered himself a prisoner of war. But, could the Queen do that? No, she grabbed her money and ran.

So, that just goes to show you how the Dutch are. All my relatives are the same way. I know, I put them all in the same situation and every one of them ran, that is, except me, my father and grandfather, we all ended up as prisoners of war, down to the last man, all of us.

You can't get away from those wooden-shoe bastards in our town. I don't believe that there ever has been a country that has produced so many store clerks, government employees, old maids, and housewives, never has there been a country that has drunk so much coffee, and done so much talking. Set their children so straight in their chairs, and still had enough time left over to sleep, fill the world with crying homely children, and make just gobs of money. If time could be put away like money the Dutch would certainly find a way to do it. All these years the Jews have been the butt of a million barroom jokes, but I truly believe that if you check far enough back into their history you will find that most of them were Dutch Jews, let me tell you, it's a condition I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

I don't really know much about my family outside of the stories that have been fed to me like Pablum. The main bombardment of these stories has come from my old milkedewed aunts, a couple of beat-up uncles, my mother of course, and a family dog trotting in now and then to give his barking sad-eyed opinion of the whole rotten affair. Outside of that, there isn't much to tell, that is unless you count the lies that have passed from generation to generation like family heirlooms. Harmless little tales that have put our family at the table of kings. The only Kings that we have ever had any contact with are the ones that live down the block, and they only talk to us because I beat up their son once in a while, just to keep him on his toes.

I did have a grandfather that wasn't totally shot, that is in

my eyes at any rate, and since they are the only ones that I have been seeing out of these days, they are the only ones that I care about. Other people's opinions just float off my back. If ever I see that anyone is getting the best of me in an argument, I make up for it by coughing or suddenly changing the subject, and if none of these fine techniques work, I can still ignore the person or give him a good one, right in the stomach, so you see I am seldom wrong.

I really am all-American. My grandfather was even born in this country. So I am not one of those jokers, that just came over on the boat, with a note pinned on my coat. It was my great-grandfather that came over with a group of about sixty people to form what is now this dumb town that I live in. He was a tall lean joker, with a face full of beard that I would imagine made him look like a fugitive from a Russian movie, or something from Devil's Island that has not eaten for a couple of years. He, I am told, was one of those worthy Christians that were so popular in this country's early history. The type of fellow that would blow your brains out if you even suggested that an Indian might be something other than a running target for a well-oiled Kentucky frontier rifle.

He was supposed to be a shipbuilder for the group, but the only ship that I could ever imagine him building was that of cutting down a tree at the water's edge, looking carefully to see if it floated, and then with that spirited pioneer courage that everyone had then, going out into the water and standing on the damn thing.

He was known for his speeches (though what business a shipbuilder has making speeches I can't say) and also for his generosity. The only trouble with that generosity was its direction, it went all one way, his.

My mother told me that later when his own children

would pay him a visit after they were married, he would instruct his wife not to serve coffee and cookies to them. But I must say that his religious speeches (for that is what they were figured out to be) were never dull, of course they were never accurate, but they were not dull. He was one time even taken forcibly away with fist marks all over his face for suggesting that America did not have freedom of speech. In short, he was what I am, a big-mouth troublemaker without a brain in his head.

My mother told me that she remembered him slightly. When she was a little girl she used to be afraid to go over to his house for a visit because his clothes were so dark and his hair so white and he spit and shouted all the time. The image that she gave me sounds like many of my teachers except for the beard. On his deathbed he put a curse on the whole town for not following his leadership. I don't know what powers he might have had but the curse sure worked.

Of course all this talk has little to do with me and Ace and Worm, but I guess that it really is part of it, I mean what am I but the sum total of my magnificently worthless family. The only thing that I can try to figure out is, who gave me the most, that great-grandfather, or his son my grandfather, or my father. I didn't get too much from my mother or her side of the family, of course all of her brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles, are all tall, and even now I can see that I am going to be very tall. You can tell by the bones, like in my wrists, they're getting ready, working all the time, for all the weight and height that I am going to have, even Ace says so.

After all that I had to go through with Ace's father, I was in the mood for a Fatima cigarette, so as we headed away from Ace's house I decided to smoke. I usually don't smoke

out in the open like that, but what difference did it make now. I (this is what my aunt always says) might as well be hung for a lamb as a goat, I think that means why not go all the way seeing that everything is all over. The only thing that stopped me before were the old ladies in our town. It seems that they have nothing better to do than follow little kids around and take cigarettes away from them; they are really rotten that way.

Ace watched me smoke as we walked back down East Street. She wasn't actually looking at me, she just knew everything I was doing. But Worm, on the other side of me, was tottering along without a thought in her head. She really made me laugh, you knew the second you looked at her that she wasn't there. She walks like Quasimodo. As soon as I saw that old bastard on television played by Charles Laughton, I tied him right up with Worm. Even Worm liked the comparison. When I told her that she walked like Quasimodo, she shot me a big beam from ear to ear, she really went crazy over that guy. Not that she looks anything like him because, as I said, if she didn't have her baby fat and that grubby look, she would be a damn fine-looking girl. •

Worm was just mad about birds and bells. Every time she heard a bell ring, she would cock her round head just like old Quasimodo. And there wasn't a bird in the park that wasn't scared stiff because Worm was always coming around trying to save them. I would say to Worm sometimes when she would climb up a tall tree to save some bird, "Worm, leave those rotten birds alone. Worm, they don't need you to save them."

"Why not," she would answer, hurt as hell.

"Why not, you ask? Why not, it's not your business to save birds, really Worm, I am not kidding you."

"Who does save them?" She would keep after me defiantly, staying right up there in her tree.

"They don't need saving." She was usually satisfied if I gave her some answer that puzzled her.

"Why?" Damn that girl.

"Because when they're very young they have to get out on their own and they go to Chicago and out West and don't have to go to school and they hang around Lake Michigan flying in the sunshine, and when you're that way, who needs to be saved." She nodded her head as if she understood, when all I had done was puzzle her which is the same thing to her, of course.

Worm didn't think there was anything wrong smoking in the open the way I was doing. That's where the two were different. Ace was irresponsible just like me, but Worm was sort of irresponsibly irresponsible. Not that I knock it or anything but there is a difference. She would smack you in the stomach if she thought that it would get a laugh out of you. She was always doing it. It's nice to see that in a girl, it really is. But Ace always knew why she did irresponsible things. For example her mother would go out of her mind because Ace would never wear boots in the winter-time. Now to most people that would be hard to understand, but not me and Ace. She used to come over to my house and throw snowballs at my bedroom window to get me out in the junk. And when I came down there would be Ace in a thin coat and white canvas sneakers. You would think that she would freeze to death, but not her, or if she was freezing to death you would never hear her complain, because it was the way she wanted it. She just thought that boots looked ugly as hell, and she was right, I never wear them myself and around here up in Michigan it gets colder than in Russia. We both hate being practical because it al-

ways means things we are forced to do. That's the fastest way to get anyone to do nothing, just don't go around telling people what they have to do, it never works.

Now take what Worm did one time. Her family doesn't have too much money and her old man is lazy, so her mother takes in roomers. A couple of years ago they bought a new house, with an apartment upstairs and one down. It had two mailboxes and even two doorbells. Well, just before they moved in, Worm went and ripped off one of the doorbells and one of the mailboxes. Her old man beat her to death for that. They were going to take her to a psychologist and everything, but what for. As soon as she told me about it, I knew why she did it. I would have done the same thing myself. All she was doing was trying for one damn moment to have one crumby house, one family, without all those roomers breathing down your neck. Believe me, I know how it is. When you take in roomers or boarders, they come first always, please the boarders, let your own children rot in hell, I tell you I would have done the same thing, who wouldn't?

I finished lighting my cigarette just as we got to East and Franklin and threw the match towards the park. It went out before it touched the ground. It's nice to do that. Throw matches around I mean, they look like tiny planes falling to the ground, or stars, or even little lightning bugs falling and dying. It's still another thing you can't do, so I do it all the time. Then I took a small puff of my Fatima and held the smoke in my mouth for a moment (I don't inhale too often because it comes out kind of choky) and let it all go at once in the autumn air. It climbed for a second and gave a white fog and through it I could see the trees in Franklin Park. For a second they covered the leaves with snow, and then it was gone and I was damn sorry.



One of my teachers is always telling me dumb things that he picks up in the stupid books that he reads. He can't look at me without shooting a line or two from one of his junky books. He said to me once, "Youth should not be a folly," and shook his big worthless head up and down thinking that this bit of information was supposed to make me faint or something.

Now really, can there be anything so stupid. After all I am dumb, but after all, why can't I do any rotten thing I want to with my rotten youth. If there is anything I do have, it's time. I have all the time in the world to be sensible like my teachers. Why not go zooming around knocking the hats off people, or in winter setting icy traps for crooks to fall in, and beating up a few ugly guys now and then. They tell me how I am wasting my time, but damn it, who seems to have the most fun. You can always be serious all over the place, but how often can you be irresponsible, how often can you pretend that you are invisible, or get shot down dead for saving the whole world, how often I ask you.

Is it any more grown up or a waste of time to play baseball all your life, just because you happen to get paid for it. Is it any more sensible to go around singing and dancing on television, only because you get gobs of money for it. Don't tell me that most people don't imagine that they're escaping from the Germans half of the time, because I just won't believe you. There is not a person in the world, and this includes my English teacher, that wouldn't jump at the chance to get into movies. To get into a picture with Errol Flynn about gunrunning and gambling and blowing up half the world, they'd grab at it, that I know.

They should divide the world into two parts. Those who want to be sensible and serious, and those like Ace and Worm and me, and put a big fence up and just see who

would be coming over to whose side. We would be shooting up fireworks every five minutes, or playing tennis in winter, or on New Year's Day instead of drinking until we couldn't stand up (a thing adults do all the time). We would be out on the ice over Lake Michigan dressed as warm as hell, with a huge fire roaring. We would cook steaks and beans and sing and dance and play baseball and football, and lay red roses on the white snow just to see how they looked. We would jump on the floating ice floes and if we did make a few mistakes, at least they would be big ones because our whole lives would be involved. So how could you ever be bored like serious people are? We would have the stars and the dark night bouncing all around, how could you be bored. Some cop or teacher would come along and tell me how impractical it all was, and I would admit that it was, and smash a home run out into the darkness where no one could find it.

We were getting close to the business section and I had to be careful with my smoking, all we would have to do was get caught smoking and skipping school at the same time, and I think after all these warnings they would take us out and shoot us. What else can you do with kids that don't straighten out. Maybe I would do the same thing in their place, don't forget if we are so bad now what will we be when we grow up, believe me, take us out and put us to the wall, and save the world a lot of trouble.

The afternoon took on a lull that I usually see from my English class window. It was right after lunch (though we hadn't had any) when everything seems to slow down for a while. The traffic crawls along like bugs, the trees drop their leaves slower, the people on the street seem half

asleep, even the birds seem to do more gliding than flapping their wings.

We cut through Franklin Park, but this time we did not stop, nor did we go near the pool again. If it was how it was this morning I don't think that I could take it. I might do something desperate, like take over the place. I would fill the pool with leaves and then take all my clothes off and swim in the nude through all those damn leaves. I don't even think that I would worry about Ace or Worm, because they would be doing the same thing, and then the police could get us for being dirty, though Ace and Worm and I have gone swimming like that before, and thought nothing of it.

It would not be like in magazine stories where everybody is crazy about those things. It would be nice if it wasn't that way. If you didn't turn to practically every story on television or in most movies and see everyone breathing like mad, I think that if everyone would go around whenever they felt like it with nothing on, we wouldn't have all that junk on our minds. I know that the seniors are always getting into trouble all the time and have to drop out of school, and the way they are always talking dirty. Instead of trying to hide the fact that girls and boys are different, why don't they just let them fool around for a while, and get the whole sneaky business out of their systems. I mean, if they stopped chasing me every time I skipped, I wouldn't know what to do and might panic and come back to school, and then again I might zoom off to Hollywood and become a movie star, so don't test me.

We made it out of the park safely with old Ace smiling at me when I looked over at the pool and Worm wondering what it was all about. We were trying to keep to the

back streets so that Mr. Henry or Miss Booboo might not trap us out on the main drag. At least on the back streets if you saw that filthy little foreign car come puttering down the street, you could always cut through back yards and still get away. But on the main streets anything could happen. People on the street would even chase you out there.

Ace and I held a kind of understood silence. It was something we did a lot when we knew there was danger lurking about, but I thought this time I'd better break it. After all, none of us had eaten a thing since the morning, and if I knew Ace she didn't have anything then. She used to not eat because her mother would get up early and spend a couple of hours just fixing breakfast. It's not like the psychologists think, that we are bad because we are lonely. That's not the case at all, it's their love and care that is murdering us. Just leave us alone for ten damn minutes without telling us to hang up our clothes, brush our teeth, don't sit in your room by yourself and be silent, don't sit in your room and make noise, look both ways before crossing the street. We know that we are going to hell, and to the dogs, and are falling apart emotionally at the seams. Well, at least let us do it without being kissed and fondled for our trouble. Let all this happen in peace. If we don't go to church every two-bit Sunday, don't think it's the end of the world. We'll probably make it through the week without being run over, and who knows, we might have a sudden pang of conscience and go twice the next time. Don't always look at us as if you feel guilty for bringing us into the world, or as soon as we get to the top of the stairs run after us and see if we made it, or if we did make it, don't just sit silently down in the living room and listen to our footsteps and wonder what we are doing. I don't even dare to look

down at the floor out of an absolute fear that it is transparent, and that my mother's face is staring at the bottom of my shoes, believe me it's a plenty odd feeling.

"I don't want you to think that I am odd," I said as we crossed the street and headed downtown, "but I haven't eaten since this morning. I think that it is safe to get some coffee. There is nothing out of place about drinking coffee, all kids do it."

Worm liked the idea too, but Ace persisted with her special little look that said don't pull any tricks. You see Ace is a good deal smarter than I am. I think she thought, by the fact I had suggested that we stop and get something to eat, that I was sort of dragging my feet. Not that she didn't believe me about going, it was just that she wanted to go farther than that. For Ace giving up our education and leaving home and even leaving this no-account little town was just the beginning. She wanted the break to be bigger. I think that she thought that my wanting to get coffee was just a front for the fact that I was scared. She knew that it would be pretty hard to find my father, and then if we did find him, then what, three kids just couldn't follow a salesman around for the rest of his life, things like that are not done too often.

But I had to show her that I meant business, that this was not just another skipping day where we would go out to the beach and talk about giving up everything like we did so often all last summer. Ace had to be straightened out, if she was right, about me being a little afraid. I would go through with it just so I wouldn't let her down.

"But see," I began as if we had been arguing this all out when in fact she still hadn't said a single word since we left her house, "don't you see, we can't just jump into things, we

have to sit down and talk a little, at least until we get some good food into us like coffee, after all."

She didn't give me a chance to finish or maybe I had. "Talking is for people that don't do anything. We can get something on the train." She pulled the thin cloth of her raincoat around her neck and walked faster. We were doing the four-forty as it was. I am a big walker, I mean I have long legs, but poor Worm had to run every ten steps or so, or she would have been trampled in the dust.

"Do we have enough money for the train and all?" I asked innocently, noticing how nice Ace's skin looked against the tan raincoat.

"We got money that just won't stop," said Worm, running a little beside me, "ever see a hundred dollars all at one time?" She pulled them out of her blouse and showed me the new twenty-dollar bills. Seeing those bills scared me a little bit, after all how often do you see a hundred dollars all at one time.

"Who did you murder?" I asked. "I hope it was some teacher that I don't like," So it was murder, now I could understand all of Ace's hurry, it meant the electric chair (a thing I had nightmares about ever since I saw Cagney get twenty thousand volts. I can still hear him screaming sometimes, thank God they don't have the electric chair here in Michigan, I was lucky there).

"It's her money for her confirmation dress," said Worm, with a tone of sad confession in her voice.

There was a lot of things Ace was and wasn't, being a Catholic was one of them, that is, she worked at it. I used to come over to her house to see if she would want to go to a movie with me, and I would find her in her bedroom sitting in the dark. Here, I thought I held the world's record

for sitting in the dark, but Ace shattered anything that I had set. I would go into her bedroom after first escaping from her yakking mother, and find her in the dark looking out the window and down at the empty street. I like to play detective a lot, and I would go over and feel the light bulbs, they were always stone-cold. You can see by that just how serious Ace took being a Catholic.

God and I are not exactly on speaking terms these days, but I did go to Ace's communion and I have to admit I was almost converted. I remember at the time I was mad because I didn't understand a thing that was going on. It was nice to see Ace kneeling there in white in front of all that gold and glowing candles. The voices and music coming from all over hell, the priest in his tall thick robes, it made me think for a moment that she was already dead, and it really broke me up; things like that are mowing me down all the time. I enjoyed it so much that Ace said I could attend her confirmation. I had been looking forward to it for a long time as much as she, if not more. Since about a year now she had been saving nickels and dimes, her birthday and Christmas money, all of it to buy a confirmation dress. It was important to her, I know it was, because she never would talk about it, and with us all the things we like we hide inside us.

A week ago she took all of her change and got bills for it, and then sold everything that wasn't nailed down in her room, and ended up with almost twenty dollars, just think twenty dollars. Her father, in one of his usual strain-filled days at the office, came home early and began tossing them down to straighten his nerves. He heard about her twenty dollars, and right out of his pocket, he pulled eighty more and gave it to her. I guess he did it because he felt

kind of sorry for her. After all, she had been saving all that time and only had twenty dollars. At the rate she was going she would have been tripping over her beard before she would have enough together to pay for her dress.

I bet she took that money out and counted it and hid it again a million times. I didn't think that there was anything in the world that would make her spend it. That's why when Worm showed me the money, I didn't tie it up with the money Ace was saving for her dress. If she meant to spend the money for our trip to Chicago, I knew that things were bad. That dress was something she and God had been cooking up for a long time.

"Ace, you don't want to, what about your confirmation?" I said, taking hold of her shoulder so that she wouldn't run right the hell off the earth. She stopped short and turned around strangely like a mechanical doll to look into my face. She was still playing around with that funny smile, but it told me nothing.

"There are a lot of things that I don't want to do," she said coldly, "and one of them is I don't want to talk right now."

We were by this time on Ionia Avenue and the railroad station was just across the street. She started across without looking either way, she just zoomed into the traffic leaving me and Worm watching the back of her raincoat. The cars stopped and honked, they were mad enough to run her down. But somehow she made it and disappeared into the station.

"You're acting like a teacher," said Worm angrily to me, and she turned away and left me too. I stood there feeling like when I see dogs on the street coming towards me. I was full of fear and it was crawling like a snake all inside of me.



## V

All the wrong things were happening. Here I was trying to convince Ace and Worm that they had no business going with me to Chicago, and all I had succeeded in doing was convince them I was afraid.

Whenever I want to know if what I am doing is right or wrong, I usually try to compare it with what someone I admire would do. What would my father or grandfather or Ty Cobb or even Errol Flynn do? Of course it is hard to guess what my grandfather would have done, he was a difficult guy to figure out. The best recommendation that he had was that his own father hated him. Beside my great-grandfather cursing our town on his deathbed, he had just

enough breath left in him to curse his son. He even went so far as to suggest that my grandfather was in some way responsible for him dying, though I think that it was just a combination of cheap food, bad liquor, and the general failing health that comes to a man of ninety-two; but none the less he suspected that my grandfather wanted to do him in. If that was the case, then my grandfather was the most patient murderer in the history of crime, because he supported my great-grandfather for the last thirty years of his life. I don't want you to think that my grandfather was responsible for the cheap food and drink. He gave him a large allowance but my great-grandfather just saved it and over the years built it into a good-sized sum. Then he did a strange thing: he burned the whole fortune in front of my grandfather's eyes, just to defy him. My mother told me how he had the money stacked in neat piles and soaked with gasoline. He knew that he was a dying man, but he didn't want somebody to get the money after he died. I can just see him now, thin, tall and white, standing over all that money and holding a match in his hand and looking into my grandfather's face to see what he was planning to do. Now to show you what kind of a man my grandfather was, he smiled at him and told him to burn it if it pleased him, and also if it pleased him he could jump in after it, then my grandfather gave out with a loud and hideous laugh. If anything killed the old man it was that laugh.

This business about my great-grandfather doesn't seem to have much to do with me going to Chicago, but it does. It's slowly working up to the sad story of my father and his decline and fall, and the decline and fall of me, his humble offspring.

If my father ever looked up to anyone, except from the

floor of a barroom, it was his own father. I used to have a picture of my grandfather and my father standing together on the beach out at Lake Michigan. I would stare at it and wonder about it. It didn't look like the same beach that Ace and I visited, but it was. In the picture there was a tall man with handlebars growing out of his nose standing by a post of a boy, my father. Everything about my father as a child suggested a fat post. His uneven round body, his small shoulders, his thick neck, everything growing together straight up and down; even the features on his face were like the knotholes of a post. It was kind of humorous to see, as if the stern face of my grandfather was proud to admit that he had sired a post for an offspring.

Almost everything my father wasn't my grandfather was, though both were handsome men. My father was poor and a failure, my grandfather was rich and a success, it is the one real thing I regret in my whole life. With a little luck I could have been a playboy, I could have made it, if my grandfather had lived and not died when he was just forty. Then no one would hold it against me that I was stupid and bad and was always getting kicked out of school. With my grandfather's money I could of had a host of lawyers to fight back at these crumby teachers that are always running me down. The hideous part of it was that there was just about one inch between me and a million dollars.

When my grandfather was in his twenties, he went into the circus business and was making all kinds of money. At that time our town was filled with a bunch of worthless Hollanders (they are all still here too), right from the old country that believed that it was a sin to breathe. I swear that this is the truth. They thought you were on this earth because you were too worthless to be anyplace else. It was

my grandfather who got the idea that since our whole town was already in hell, we might as well enjoy it. He opened the first circus that this town had ever seen. Way the hell out on the Chicago Drive highway, so that the city fathers could do nothing about it. It was really something to see from what my mother tells me. It had everything in it, including a freak show and a midget city. The midget city was built like dollhouses, they even had midget outhouses in back of them. My mother told me that he used to set his son, my father, inside the midget city and roar with laughter to see my father sitting down with the midgets, and having himself one hell of a good time. I can just picture my father sitting down on the little furniture and having tea and talking over the sad condition of the midget world.

After only two years, my grandfather had opened two movie houses (then a very revolutionary thing) and was getting ready to open a third, the Knickerbocker Opera House. The Knickerbocker Opera House was to have vaudeville and plays and music and everything. (It is now the RKO Regent Theater, where I see all my Errol Flynn pictures.) My grandfather had an accident putting lights in the Knickerbocker sign. No one else had guts enough to go up there, because of the height. That is why I say there was only one inch between me and a million dollars. For as he sat on a scaffold putting in the white lights for the large sign, one of the links of the chain (now listen to this rotten luck) broke, and with the light bulbs still in his hand and his body in a sitting position, he went crashing to the soft cement.

When my father got to him, the light bulbs were still in his hand, though they were all crushed, and he was stone-still with his spine coming right through the center of his

skull. He was taken to his brother's shop, the building next door (my grandfather owned that as well as the whole block which is now the heart of the town) and he sat there on the table for the doctor to come and pronounce him dead.

There was one good thing to all this, and one bad. The bad thing was that my grandfather never carried less than a thousand dollars on his person and when the doctor arrived the money was missing. The only person that had been alone with him at the time was his brother, so he must have been the one that had taken it. I wouldn't think that this was such a bad thing in itself, but the rotten bastard hated my grandfather, because he happened to be a decent human being, which he the brother was not.

The good thing (and this was one of the reasons I will always love my father) happened that same damn worthless night when the whole town was asleep except for our house. A policeman was walking past the darkened Knickerbocker and heard what sounded like the popping of a gun followed by short almost silent sobs. He didn't know what it was until a small light bulb came crashing down at his feet. He looked up into the darkness and saw my father sitting with his feet dangling over that same scaffold, putting the rest of the lights in the large sign. The opera house was never to open up as the Knickerbocker Theater. It sat and rotted for over fifteen years until the RKO people bought it for almost nothing and chased out the rats. If my grandfather had lived just five more years, we would have been the richest family perhaps in this whole crumby state. They found out later that they could have sued the chain company, the chain was new and it had a guarantee. But my grandmother was too stupid or too Christian, or both, to sue. So all the

money just flowed away from our family like so much water and the whole town relaxed because God had again stopped another evil Noone.

The Regent Theater still has a marker made of sandstone way up at the top of the building. It has been snowed and rained and sunned on for the last forty years and you can hardly make out the letters. But it still says the Knickerbocker Opera House, and it was my grandfather who built it, and as far as I am concerned it will always be his. If ever I get a job (and the possibilities are thin) I would like to save enough to buy it back from the RKO chain, and put that big sign back up there and let it burn all night but let no one ever go inside, just have it blaring out against the black night, the Knickerbocker Opera House.

## VI

You must be wondering by now what it was that drove my father out of this town and why is everyone down on him. Of course if you are not interested, there is nothing I can do. If you think that people like Mr. Henry and Miss Boo-hoo and that science class rat, Mr. J.F.K. Queens, is how things should be, then you wouldn't care about my father or even about Ace or Worm or me. You might as well go out and join those literary clubs like Ace's mother, or take cigarettes away from kids in the streets, be a monitor or privy captain, go ahead and turn in your best friends just because they write a few poetical sentences on the boys' room walls. You are on the outside of this fence I plan to

build. It doesn't shake you up to see fireworks going off in the sky and it doesn't make you mad to see a swimming pool half full of water and rotten leaves, go ahead you can even run for President of the United States, see if I care.

The very best example of what kind of a human being my father was can be found on a certain Christmas morning, a hell of a time back. I never can remember my age from one year to the next. I can tie it up with a few rotten events, and that's about all. It's as if time too isn't working right for me because I am such a no-good bastard. Last year had just six or seven events that I can recall, and the year before three or four, maybe that's the horror of growing up, it's like money you lose, you can't account for it, and it drives you crazy.

Well, I do remember this one Christmas that I had when my father was still around and wasn't crawling all over the place drunk and shouting. He and my mother slept in different rooms because, I don't know why. I remember that I was lying in bed and I was warm, and the snow and the Michigan evergreen were both outside of my bedroom window, and both seemed filled with Christmas.

I got out of my bed and thought for a moment that the snow had somehow sneaked in at night while I was asleep and settled on my bedroom floor, it was so cold against my white feet. My room was silent, even my clock had stopped ticking, its frozen hands revolting and refusing to work on that Christmas morning.

I left the warm sheets of my bed that were already becoming cold and didn't bother putting anything around me. I have always hated bathrobes and pajamas and I have a million of them that I get every year for Christmas, and they always stayed like new in my bureau drawers. Even though my mother would cry over it, I would not wear them, to



hear her it was just another example of my soon-to-come downfall.

Out in the hall the rug felt warm against my feet. I looked into the hall mirror and saw a young boy in white shorts staring at me, he sure looked cold. I went over to my brothers' door and heard nothing, they were all still dead-asleep. My mother and sister shared the same room, and I could hear the sound of someone snoring. I think that it was my sister, because she had trouble in the summer with certain kinds of flowers. She drooled all over the pillow too, and I hated her for it.

I walked past the mirror again and stopped at my father's door. He didn't sleep there too often and his door was usually open and you could see the huge bed that hadn't been slept in, and it was a sad thing to see. But this time the door was shut tight and I could hear what sounded like a growling dog inside. I was a little afraid to open it for fear that something might jump out at me, I have always been afraid of dogs. Finally I opened the door and was almost knocked down by a cold blast of air. My father always slept with a window wide open, because he used to be a sailor he told me, although right now I am not sure what sailors have to do with open windows but I accepted it then as a very good explanation.

The door made a telltale sound as if to warn the sailor that he was about to be spied on. I sure hate it when someone is watching me sleep, that's another thing my mother does a lot. It seems to me that it's a pretty private thing, like sleeping with nothing on if you want to. I don't usually spy on people when they are asleep, but I saw my father so seldom that I figured that I had a spy's or detective's license to do so. Besides, if he did wake up I could make myself invisible like Lamont Cranston, the Shadow.

My mother had white lace bedspreads that she put on all the beds and they looked just like snow-covered graves when you were sleeping under them. The bedspread that she puts on my bed every morning, I throw on the floor at night, holy God, they are spooky-looking things. My father seemed out of place in that bed, the white lace bedspread made him look as if he were dead, his face was even white. He had thrown his clothes on the floor sometime in the blindness of the night, and they were tangled in a heap like the smashed arms and legs of a man wrestling by himself.

The growling sound had stopped as I came into the room, as if in his sleep he knew that I was there. His huge head was turned away from me and his thick hair, which was only around his ears, was massed against the white pillow. I was feeling cold and it was not all only because of the open window. Suddenly he turned and faced me, and his eyes were wide open. He just looked funny at me, he did not smile, he didn't say anything. He just opened up the warm sheets and closed them quickly over me as I climbed in beside him. His body and the sheets felt like warm water all over me. I didn't too much like his body against mine because it was so hard and big. His face was next to mine and it hurt me too; for some reason he was whispering.

"Do you know what day this is," he said putting his huge hand into my hair, I told him that it was Christmas morning. And he said yes and his voice was even lower and softer than it was before. "This is the morning that Christ was born my dear, my sweet *Schatzi*." He pressed his lips on mine, and they were very warm, and they carried to me the faint taste of whiskey. I was once again forced into the feeling of fear like when I am asleep and dogs are chasing me.

Somehow that same morning I fell asleep again and when

I awoke I was back in my own bed. The sun was coming in the window now and the snow was giving out an SOS as it sparkled and melted away. Just as that Christmas melted away, because I can't remember another thing about it. See, I even have a dumb memory. You can't build a father out of a few words and a couple of smells, but either there was nothing there or my brain is too caught up with the Chicago business.

## VII

"Hey you," shouted Worm, sticking her head out of the railroad station across the street from me. "I am talking to you." That was a dirty little lie in itself because she was shouting, but I crossed the street and followed her into the dark station. It was just filled with old ladies and sailors and fat men, more than I have ever seen in my whole life.

"Over here," Worm whispered, half dragging me by the sleeve. "We got a real good spot to wait, you should see it." And it was only a moment later and somehow I survived without too much of Worm's excitement rubbing off on me, that girl is going to be the death of me one of these days.

There sat Ace, cool and calm as hell. The little overnight bag was at her side on the seat. She had one arm resting across it as if it was full of the family jewels. "I bought you a ticket," she said, "the train leaves in ten minutes. Well, what is it going to be, the Regent Theater or Chicago?" She knew damn well that she already had my answer, but she looked at me and then out the door towards the tracks with a puzzled expression which was supposed to give me the impression that she was asking a question.

"Ace, please Ace, come off this muscle stuff. I haven't been acting like some damn teacher. Next you will be calling me a good citizen, damn it Ace, I have feelings after all. I was just taking it a little slow." Then I sat down and told her about the raw deal my grandfather got, although she had heard the story a hundred times. "And do you know," I shouted over the blaring of the loud speaker calling us to the train, "that damn fool went up there that same damn winter night, I swear Ace, he did."

She picked up the bag and we headed towards the door marked CHICAGO AND POINTS SOUTH AND WEST. She couldn't hear what I was saying but they both knew what I was talking about, I always get a certain odd look on my face when I talk about how so many things never are fair. Ace was looking at me quietly but Worm was shaking her head up and down, and all three of us were just smiling like mad.

I don't think I have to tell you that we got on the train without any trouble. Worm suggested that we pin notes on our chests, saying that we were on our way to Chicago, and please see that we got good seats, and that we are deaf and dumb. Ace and I thought that we might not pull it off because we would break out laughing. So, we just found our seats and waited for the train to pull out.

It took another ten years to get the train started because the conductors kept pulling out their watches, and staring at them. I guess they did not know what time it was, because after a while they got in a huddle and started looking at each other's watches. Then a guy with a large can came around and he looked at their watches for a while. Soon the train began its jerky movement then it stopped and started again, and damn if it didn't stop again.

A colored man was chasing the train next to my window, and he gave me a scared look when I smiled at him. I guess he was the only one left in the whole damn town that hadn't seen the conductor's watch and they must have stopped to show it to him. He came down the aisle of the car and he tripped as the train zoomed ahead in a hell of a gust of speed, I bet we were going all of five miles an hour. The colored man recovered himself by mashing his hand into the soft shoulder of a fat lady who was eating something. She gave him a look of utter disgust which if it had been me would have earned her a smash in the stomach.

As he came past me, I asked him, "How was it, man," I meant the conductor's watch that he must have seen. All he did was give me a look of utter superiority. I don't know what is happening to the colored people. Hell, you used to say, "How you doing man," and they would say, "Cool man cool," and they'd grin you a sunshine look that would really make you feel good. But now there is no talking to them. You say anything to them now, and they ask you your name as if they were going to report you to the N.A.A.C.P. They are getting just like my teachers, and I will have nothing to do with them. This spook took off without saying a word and probably haunted the bar for the whole trip to Chicago talking about injustice and junk like that.

"He didn't know what you meant," said Ace who had been watching the conductors' dopey little act too. "What was that you were telling me about your grandfather, I couldn't hear because of the train."

Worm and Ace were sitting together and I was just across the aisle. Worm sat next to the window and paid no attention to us. She was one of those kids that went out of their mind whenever you set them by a window. You would have to hit her on the head with a sledgehammer to get her attention.

"You mean about the Knickerbocker Opera House," I said excitedly.

"Yes, I guess so. Is that what you were talking about?" Ace smiled at me from the comfort of her chair, she sure looked happy. She wasn't asking me about my grandfather just to be nice, she really was interested. But since we were on this train to find my father, I was thinking more about him now.

We weren't going to Chicago without any chance of finding my father. I did have a postcard of a big building with lions out in front, that was supposed to be the library or art gallery with the return address of the Cody Hotel on the back. With a name like that, you can't help but find it. I bet everyone in town knows where it is. Though of course he might not still be living there, I have carried the card around with me all last year. He didn't even write anything on the back, just our address and the name of his hotel. I pretended there was a secret message written in invisible ink, and every now and then I would take it out and stare at it, it told me a lot of things.

I remember one time I was with Ace and we were sitting out under some pine trees at the bottom of Franklin Hill. It

was so dark under there, you would think the sun had died. There were pine needles and white pitch on the ground that stuck to your clothes and it drove Ace's mother mad to think that her daughter would actually sit on the ground with a boy and laugh and giggle together. It was a very dirty thing to do, according to her. I remember Ace asked in her own special whispering way if I still had that postcard and I took it out and showed it to her. She would always look at the lions, and at my father's handwriting and the large letters on the front that said TAKE A TRIP TO CHICAGO. It was a pretty dangerous thing to tell someone because there would be a lot of people who would do it. Worm and Ace and I had been thinking about it for a long time; and here we were with everything we didn't want behind us, and every chance we had in front, it was a dangerous thing.

I have to tell you what elements it was that drove my father out of our town. It's the same elements that are down on me and Worm and Ace. That is why I tie them together, perhaps that is why we are going to Chicago to see my father, he is the only one who can help us, the only person in the world that we still respect and will listen to, and he is a drunk. If there is anything that makes me puke it is when an adult asks me what I want to be, or worse yet, why am I bad. As soon as somebody comes across with that little jewel I turn on my secret radio full blast and hold back the impulse to spit right in his eye. You want to know why kids are bad, why they don't listen to their adults. It is because the adults are not worth listening to. We are not that dumb, we can spot their corny lies from a mile away. Their whole sickening attitude is so obvious to us, the way they come across with this "What's your problem son," don't you think we know fakes when we see them.



My teachers told me that I don't respect authority when in fact it is the only thing I do respect, but I never see it, I just see dull men that shout for obedience, not respect. It is true that for the most part we are disrespectful to our parents. But that disrespect doesn't come out of nothing, something had to give it birth. For example, if Ty Cobb was to order me around, he would represent authority. But I would do what he told me. No, it is not just to defy, just to be smart, just to be a punk, no, all the blame can't be pushed on us, we are not about to take it. Some of us will go to the electric chairs of the world before we would take all the blame for your crumby failures as human beings.

Why don't we want to learn, why do we skip school? Because it simply doesn't interest us. Because you tell us that it is the most important thing in the world, and if it's important to you, then it's you that want more out of it than we, and we start distrusting you again. Go and sit in one of our English classes and listen to those thin and fat smiling teachers shoot us a lot of names of people we don't know. So some dead man in England wrote a lot of words that rhyme, what are we supposed to do, bump ourselves off because we don't like it, and if the reason that we don't like it is because we don't understand it, whose fault is it. We should love poems, and books, and learning. Well, what is this love, something that we are just supposed to have born in us like an extra brain.

We begin by seeing life in our own homes, we see smallness, little petty victories, silly little games, then we are sent to school where we learn to read that Jimmy can walk, that Jimmy can run, that Jimmy can even have a dog and cat. Then all of a sudden they throw a thick book in front of us and tell us that it's great literature, just what in hell is that supposed to mean to us. Did we ever see it on tele-

vision that it was important to learn, was it ever given to us from our parents that there was anything in this world but how to be careful with money, don't spend too much, save, save, learn the value of money, remember all we have done for you, above all remember how great we your mother and father are, and it is all just so much slop in our ears, and we are sick on to death with hearing about it. And the fakest words of all that they say to me are that I must grow up. No thank you, while I am in Chicago I will shoot a cop and fry in the electric chair before I will be tricked into growing up. Flynn or Cobb didn't have to grow up. What they really mean is, be a serious swine like me. It's just another way they have of putting you in your grave with words. I have yet to see a handsome matinee idol that was an all-American jerk with a family, no, in the end they run off into the sun with the most gorgeous babe that you have ever seen, no junky father-and-mother bit for them.

From English class we go to mathematics which is even worse. It is so isolated from our lives that the numbers might as well be icebergs for all the damn use we see in them. And then to science where we always have teachers that talk about and look just like bugs, they even seem ready to give up being human and join the bug world. We can't find what we need in any two-bit school. So we go out to the streets for it, and we don't find it there, and it's the hidden secret of all of us kids. We want adventure, we want Flynn and Cobb, and we don't want skinny homely teachers that could never have anything to tell us what is important. So you see that our skipping school is not just that same worn-out junky lie about how we are products of broken homes, you just can't sum up everything with one phony

phrase, we are working on something big, perhaps as big as the whole damn universe.

Maybe my father was working on something big too. It is hard to say if he was the town drunk, that spot is usually taken by more capable people like those that hang around the morning produce. There's Tommy Pinch, who lives in a truck with no wheels and can drink antifreeze right out of the engine of your car. He can sleep in below-zero weather (though my science teacher says it is impossible) and many times my father has scraped him off the ground after sleeping there most of the night. His clothes and even pieces of his flesh were actually frozen to the ground, that is to say, and this is scary as hell, the water in his skin froze with the snow on the ground as if old nature didn't even know that was a man lying there. He always came out of it all right, and worked long enough to get a little more to drink and he was off to his truck without any wheels, and I bet he covered a hell of a lot of ground.

But my father was right up in the running with the big-time drinkers of the city, and I was proud of him. Everyone says that he started nice and came to a bloody end, I agree to that in part. After my grandfather was killed my father had to take over, he being the oldest brother. It seems that my grandmother (and as far as I am concerned, more power to her, because I despise people who handle money well) was a poor manager of her husband's affairs. But she did send her sons, and there was a gang of them, through college to become doctors and lawyers, and I imagine if one of them had the desire she could have made him an Indian chief; but they all had good sensible professions. That is, all except my father. He never became anything, that is, anything that is taught in college. If he had been

a doctor, he would have been like Ace's father (without that stupid painting). If he had been a lawyer, he would be working for gangsters, and if he had been a chemist, he would make bootleg liquor, and most likely be a drug addict, so you see he is one fine fellow.

Of all the brothers, my father was the best-looking, the best in sports. He began his so-called decline as a lifeguard out at the beach at Lake Michigan. He had a stocky build and a shock of blond hair (it was one of a number of things he lost) that bowled over my mother, a very beautiful (this I will never believe) shy sixteen years old. My sister was the firstborn, and it is fitting that she was a bastard because that's exactly what she is now and that's what she'll always be as far as this hateful little snake is concerned. She turned out to be the type of woman that every time she looked at you, you're afraid she is going to give you a religious pamphlet, she has an endless stock of them hidden all over her fat body. If you ever see her you will know her on sight, she has that I-am-going-to-save-you look on her ugly puss. It's really sickening.

After my sister made her sneaky way into the world, a brother of mine was born, the only one of the whole bunch that I ever liked, and I never met him. He blasted himself into this world, lived the shorter part of eleven years, and blasted himself right out again. It's a story my mother won't stop talking about, and it's a story my father will never talk about. The whole thing was a pretty messy affair.

It seems my dad had stayed sober long enough to get himself a job as a night watchman at some place or other, and they even gave him a gun. He used to hide the gun under his mattress in the bedroom, but it was moved because a fire accidentally started there when a bed lamp

fell and lay there most of a certain rainy afternoon. My mother moved the gun while the mattress was being replaced, and my brother saw her hide it in a bookcase. Well, the papers said it was an accident, that even though the boy was precocious (their word, not mine) even though the day before an old man he liked on the block had died, even though he asked my sister where do you go when you die, even though he asked the same sister where the heart was located, even though he dreamed about guns that same night, everybody screamed accident, everybody cried and made mad love to my mother and cursed my father, who was drunk at the time. The whole business was rotten and dirty and my father was sent to hell, and he could never come out of it. My mother went to my brother's grave a million times a week and my father never went and it was just another reason to hate him. I often wonder if my brother ever got to see that old man down the block, it was a hell of a funny way to go and look for him, don't you think.

Well, four or five monstrous brothers came along after that. All very good students in school, all very clean and level-headed, most of them growing up and out of my life before I was even born. My mother loving them no less than the others, my father indifferent and almost cold, coming across with a few dollars when he could make it. He swore he never would hold or be seen on the street with any of them, and led the life more of a bachelor, drinking more, talking less, taking longer and longer walks, with everyone in town keeping their eye on him (for his dear wife's sake, the poor saint) when he came close to the city limits, thinking he might try to make a dash for it.

I don't know why my mother gave me her dead son's

name, she might have done it just to put a curse on me, maybe she expected me to follow in his small footsteps.

I think about blasting myself out of here sometimes, but it never will go beyond that, I guess. I would want to see how everyone acted after I killed myself. How could I do it, with my young face, I would hate the idea of that being a corpse. I couldn't stand people mourning over me like they do my brother, flowers and stones and tears and a black dress and a lot of rotten strangers looking at you, God it is sickening. Or to think that one of these clammy-handed morticians would touch my body, would take out my blood, would dress and undress me, no, I would rather take a boat out in the middle of the ocean and watch the sky for a while and then when no one is looking slip silently over the side.

I kind of think my father used to blame me for being born. I don't think he knew how it happened. He believes that I sneaked in there (my mother's stomach) when no one was around. He knew for a fact that he didn't put me there. He used to look at me sometimes and just stare without saying a word: It made me uncomfortable at first but I got used to it. He would come home drunk and begin shouting. "Where is that sin of my wife, where are you, you black evil thing?" I was usually in bed at that hour and he would throw open my door and begin shouting again. "You think that because you have my only boy's name, you can worm your way into my heart. Well, you can't. You're not mine. You're some sneaky mistake that woman made when I was out on the road" Usually by this time the whole house was up and my older brothers would come and take him to his room where he would quiet down and fall asleep.

I don't know where he got the idea that I wasn't his son

unless it was because I am better-looking than he is. My dad's a pretty vain guy, and it might have been simple male jealousy. In that case it's just good clean animal fun, in other words he would like to mop up the floor with me. But he was kind to me (as far as I'm concerned, anything he did was all right because I knew that underneath everything that damn fool was crazy in love with me, if no one understands that then to hell with them, and that goes for their cat too, in capital letters) so kind that it was even hard to talk about it. My relationship with my father, I was told by one of my more enterprising teachers, a man that was only around for a couple of years and gave up teaching to go into something called industrial relationships, was supposed to be abnormal. I don't know exactly where he got his facts. He told me that I really hate my father, and love my mother, who is the butt of all aggression. That all I really want is my mother's love (which according to him I've never had) and that my father is out to castrate me or something like that. I watched my father a couple of times when he used to come into my room shouting, but he never had a knife as far as I can remember. As I said, this teacher now works in some crummy factory because it pays more, with a theory like that someone should castrate him and I hope they use a dull knife.

Everyone in school that knew me knew my father took a drink now and again, and that he was some kind of unsuccessful salesman. But he had a lot of good ideas too. There was one that would have made him an easy million. He wanted to start a Bottle-a-Week Club and give dividends for everyone who zoomed it down faster than one a week. It would have really gone over. But anyway if he did drink too much (which I don't really admit is true, as far

as I am concerned if he did anything he did not drink enough) whose business is it, whose life is it, whose failure is it, surely not theirs. What's this crumbly desire to act like dictators? Leave the old guy alone, if there is anything this world doesn't need, it is another million little dictators spouting a million used-up phrases. My teachers do it, the rest of the kids do it, every tinhorn cop does it, even Mr. Love, the janitor, does it. Jake the Rake wasn't that way. Maybe that is why they fired him. If Jake complained a lot and pushed people around, who knows, maybe he could even have been mayor of this little nothing town, but why anyone would want to do that, I don't know, it would be a rotten way to make a living.

The train was on the tracks that ran next to Lake Michigan now. Worm was looking out and down the smooth sand dunes that lead to the choppy water. There was nothing on the water except where the sky touched. There was a long black ore boat that must have left its dock sometime in the middle of the night. It didn't even look as if it was moving, but it was. You could tell by the thin line of smoke that trailed out floating over the water. Ace had gone to clean up, so I got up and sat next to Worm. She is alone a lot, and I thought I would sit with her a while.

"Look Worm, that boat doesn't even look like it is moving," I said giving her a punch on her arm.

"It's going to fall off the earth pretty soon," she said sadly without taking her face away from the window.

"Worm, when Ace comes back we are all going to the dining car, it's really nice there, they have tables and everything."

I think she was feeling kind of junky, after all it was the



first time she had been away from home. You hear of kids being brought up lousy, well, Worm's lousiness set records. They are on welfare most of the time, because of her worthless old man who, as I told you, Worm calls the dirty German. Of course I am in a tough spot, I don't put down my father who is supposed to be absolutely worthless, but I do put down Worm's father. How is this little thing possible? Well, as far as I am concerned, there are two kinds of bastards. In my dad's case, he acts like a bastard but isn't. Then there is Worm's father, he is a bastard because he was born that way, and likes it. I could tell you some things about that man that no one would believe. He used to watch his kids taking a bath and afterwards would make them run through the house without any clothes on (for what reason I don't know), and he would make them sit in a cold leather chair. I don't think a day passed that he wasn't beating on one of them. Why Worm would miss any of that, I didn't understand.

My little talk didn't seem to do anything for old Worm, except make her lean closer to the window. That big bad ore boat was really getting her.

"It is just a boat, Worm, if it falls off the earth everyone will jump into little boats and row back here and get into the inovies and everything. Hell, those lifeboats have food and things to drink. Damn, I bet they've even got peanut butter, they are not so bad off."

I was lying a little but it was all right, because it was perking her up.

"But what if they don't have lifeboats?" she asked as the ore boat began to disappear more and more. Old Worm could get her mind into a lot of trouble when she let it do a little wondering.

"What the hell, they can make one, can't they. You've heard of the ship's carpenter. What do you think they bring him along for, they are not that dumb."

"Yes, I guess so," she said sadly, half believing me. The smoke lay way out there on the waterline and then a second later that too was gone.

"If we weren't going to Chicago, we could wait there down on the beach and welcome them back. They could probably row the whole distance in ten hours. For a good sailor that's no distance, I am telling you the truth, Worm, no kidding, that's no distance at all."

Just then I spotted Ace coming down the aisle. She always walked as if she were the only person in the world, as I said before, Ace had a real go-to-hell walk. She sat down in my old seat and looked across at me and Worm.

"We will be in Chicago in another hour. Can you last that long without dying of hunger? Then we will spend a fortune, what do you think Worm?"

Worm agreed sadly. She was still thinking about that ore boat, and she went back to looking out of the window. She gazed out over the choppy water, where the ore boat should have been. Of course it hadn't really gone down where she was looking because the train had been cutting along like mad over the tracks, but Worm didn't care. The last time she looked out of the window she had seen the little trail of smoke, and as far as she was concerned the ore boat was still out there. I think she was looking for the little boat to come rowing in any second now.

"What about me," I said trying to sound firm, "I know that you two would outvote me but I would like to make an effort, you know, just to keep up the appearance of democracy."

"Oh," said Ace giving me a little smile that was full of white teeth. "So you protest, so shut up before I slam you a good one in the mouth!" She was just the opposite of Worm, the farther she got away from that clammy town, the better she was feeling. "Do you think old man Henry has found out yet that we have given up our education?" she asked.

"Sure." I said, "he is running in to Miss Booboo's room right now, shouting at the top of his lungs, 'They have escaped, they have escaped you blundering fool, quick to the borders, where are my maps?'" I couldn't help a little chuckle as I began patting my chest, looking for something that I could use as a map. I found my father's postcard with the lions on it and held it up. "That dirty little William Noone, he has escaped with two of my prize students, quick Miss Booboo to the car, according to my maps we should overtake them at the park, ha-ha this time he has completely outsmarted himself, the little guttersnipe. I am having the Regent Theater watched, as well as the park and the swimming pool."

I stopped because people were turning in their seats to see old Ace laughing and me ready to give my Tarzan cry, but I held it back because the conductor with the watch was coming towards us.

"Here, what is the trouble, my young man, are you getting sick, sonny?" He bent over my chair and tried to look concerned as hell. I hate it when someone calls me their man or sonny or young man, I wanted to shout my Tarzan cry right into his face, I wanted to cry and shout, but I knew that he was on their side, so I held back and gave him the calmest smile I had ever seen.

"Oh, no sir, I was just explaining to my sister the part

I have in a Christmas play at my school in Chicago, was I making too much noise?" My voice sounded like my poetry teacher when she was reading some sad and crumby poem.

"You watch yourself, young man, this is no gymnasium, this here's a train," he said, looking from me to Ace and Worm.

He started to leave when I got a bright idea. "Say, buddy, what time you got?"

That no-good Ace broke out laughing and Worm went right along with her. I looked calm and concerned as well as I could, but little jerks of laughter were coming out of my mouth. The conductor began taking his watch out of his pocket but stopped with a swift movement of his bald old head which got redder than anything when Ace began laughing.

"Listen, you little smart aleck, this here's a train." He looked like he was ready to grab me and shake the living hell out of me. That Ace was still laughing; she had enough sense to turn towards her window, but I could still hear her snickering. I wanted to tell him to buzz out of here Buster and take that lousy watch with you, but I controlled myself to my own amazement.

"One more word out of you," he said, his red head bobbing back and forth completely out of his control, "and when you arrive you will find your smart-aleck ways are in trouble." Then he turned on his heels like an officer in the German Army and marched down the aisle towards the club car. It was lucky for me that he did, because my laughter had turned into a fit and I just buried my head in my hands and laughed away.

## VIII

To my shock we reached Chicago without getting arrested. The conductor came through a couple of unnecessary times, each time with a more determined walk than before, just his walk looked terribly important. One time I went spying on him in the club car. I stood on the noisy platform in between the cars and watched him talking to the colored man that had tripped in our car. The colored man was trying to press a drink on him, but he kept refusing it by waving his hands, finally after a million waves the colored man stopped asking and the conductor looked hurt. I shot back to my seat just as he came through for the last time calling out, "Chicago. Chicago the last stop all points south and

west change here. Keep your seats until the train comes to a halt, please, we are in a busy and dangerous part of the yard. Please keep your seats, please."

Of course no one was paying much attention to him but I was smart enough to keep mine until the train stopped. That slob was just looking for an excuse to turn me in. Kids are not as safe as adults when it comes to arrest. Adults can call this type of bastard's bluff, but kids cannot, you were being a smart aleck if you did.

As we stepped off the train I caught the conductor looking at his watch again, and I gave him a real friendly I-know-all-about-you wink. He knew that he couldn't touch me any more, so he just pretended that he didn't see it, and climbed back up on his train again. I wanted to go back and catch him glancing at that watch again, but Ace thought it would be too much, the guy might attack me or something.

We followed the well-dressed businessmen in between the steaming trains along a narrow platform that led out of the station and on what I guessed was the main street of Chicago. What do you think, it turned out to be Michigan Avenue of all things, wasn't that strange? Here we did all this traveling, coming all the way from Michigan, and what does the sign say, Michigan Avenue. It scared the hell out of all of us. I thought for a minute that the rotten conductor had the last laugh, but it turned out all right, it was just the name of the street.

We began walking towards the tall buildings. On our side of the street there was this huge park with Lake Michigan. The other side had only tall buildings. For some reason everybody was walking on the other side of the street. I don't know why, it was nicer on our side of the street.

You can see the green grass, the lake and I bet a million sailing boats, their masts looking like a game of pick-up-sticks that someone had tossed against the sky. The water looked more choppy than on the Michigan side. A kid I know told me that they do not have sand dunes on this side, so you see they are missing a lot of things.

For some odd reason I felt I had been here before and when I mentioned it to Ace, she said, "The postcard." A truck was zooming by just then, and I didn't understand what she had said, I thought she said coast guard, so I shot my eyes on the open water expecting to see a huge ship with its cannon trained right at us.

"Where?" I yelled, getting ready to take the bag from Worm and run for our lives.

"You have it, I saw you put it back in your pocket," said Worm, sitting down on one of the stone benches that lined the long street. I knew now where I had seen the street too, and quickly took out the postcard that was getting worn and soft. No kidding, it was, it was the very same street as on the postcard. I could see on our side of the street the huge old-fashioned stone building with the lions in front of it, I am not lying it was the same.

I don't know what is the natural attraction I seem to have for parks, but somehow I always end up in them. If I die, and I do not think that I ever will, not from old age at any rate, I bet it will be in a park. It's just the law of averages, I am in them all the damn time. I do not get excited too often, but I was at that moment. Even Ace and Worm could tell it, so they just sat down together on the stone bench and left me alone. Most of the afternoon was gone, we had left it somewhere in Michigan. There was a little bit of darkness just above the trees and boat masts

out in the choppy water, they seemed to be the only thing that prevented the darkness from falling to the ground. The green in the grass was lighter than that in the trees, a few lonely sea gulls were calling *gull-gull* out over the water.

The darkness seemed to be coming quicker now and Ace and Worm were both silent. I just stood there on the sidewalk watching the whole murderous affair. I was thinking mostly of myself, but that isn't such a damn selfish thing to do, is it? It wasn't just all me, I gave a little thought to Huntington and his woodcutting, and to Flynn and his flying flashing sword, and to old Cobb sitting on his porch shouting at people, and to my dad too for getting into his old Hudson and deserting his family that had deserted him long ago. My thoughts were chased away with the coming on of the streetlights, and I looked at Ace and Worm and gave them the warmest smile that was in me.

"We got to get something to eat before we drop dead in our tracks," I said, without looking at Ace's face. She always knew too much.

"What about over there," said Worm pointing to a huge hotel across the street that was lit up like a Christmas tree, and sparkling out different colors. Under the sign it gave the time, which I didn't bother to look at because I do not like it.

"It looks expensive," Worm added excitedly.

Ace didn't give it a single thought as we walked in under a light calling out steaks and cocktails. The lights made all our skins change like a chameleon. We were red and blue and green all at the same time. We sure looked odd for a second.

It was one of those places that try to save on electricity



and at the same time make it impossible to see what you are eating. They could slip you almost anything in that kind of a light. I whispered to Ace, "Be careful, you know what kind of a reputation Chicago has for gangsters. They could be hiding all over the place and you wouldn't even see them. They could hide behind one of those giant plants with the huge leaves, and shoot you down while you were drinking your coffee; it happens all the time."

The waiter looked down at us standing there from the top of his nose. He even had a hard time seeing us because of the darkness, but at last he found us, and asked what we wanted. Now wasn't that sort of a dumb question. I should have told the bastard that it was a holdup. It seems just because we are kids we stop being human beings and don't have to eat. I have had people ask me the same question, when I went to use the men's room in the gas station, I tell you, adults are not human when it comes to kids.

I was about to tell this joker to take his spooky joint and jam it, but I said politely, like a man that knew what the hell the world was about, "A table for three, please."

"Oh, yes sir," said the waiter bowing his head as if he were taking a curtain call, "this way please, sir."

That was a little better. I suspected the bum would lead us out a side door, and into an alley where he would have a couple of thugs work us over for being smart, but he didn't. He led us into the dining room and as far away from the bar as possible. He even pulled out the chairs for Ace and Worm to sit down in. He was a real gentleman. Worm gave him a suspicious look when he kept his hand on the back of her chair. I think she suspected that he was going to pull the seat out from under her as she sat down, but he didn't so she relaxed a little.

We had the best table in the house. There were green plants on almost all sides, and there were fish tanks with little bubbles coming up from the bottom and candles all over hell, I had to admit it was a real nice place.

A colored guy brought water and silver and set the table. They could have had that all done before we got there and saved a lot of time. I said, "How you doing man" (I always say that to colored people), but he didn't answer me. I was a little hurt because of that, but when he went away Ace told me that the busboys were not supposed to talk to the diners. But I wasn't going to ask the guy to sit down, I just wanted to know if they were treating him right, after all we were in Chicago.

He came back with even more silver and I tried to give him my indifferent look that I use on most of my teachers, but it didn't work too well, because I couldn't stop staring at him. He was a real handsome bastard, with tan skin that looked as if it had been colored by the sun. He saw me looking at him just as the waiter came back and shot me a quick smile that gave himself away completely. It was white and flashing, and it said, "Play it cool man, I am hep." I knew he couldn't keep up that stern half-assed sophistication. He knew what the world's all about. They could slap them in those starched white coats, and they could order them around until they were red in the face, but I usually can pick out the guys you can't cut down. It's in the way they wear their hair, and in this guy's case, it was thick and black and curly. It said, "Look man I am no chump, I might wait on your table, I might shine your boots but put me in the same room with a good-looking babe, and I will make you look sick."

The waiter set huge cards in front of us that you almost

had to be a weight lifter to hold up straight. He talked like a man that wasn't used to speaking, it seemed such an effort.

"Do you care to order now, sir?" He said sir as if he were swearing at you, most of the damn menu was in French or Russian or something (it couldn't have been Russian because they were the current events enemy in our history class paper. You should hear all the bad things they are doing this year).

Ace looked over the jungle of glassware and silver and said, "I will order." Her voice sounded just as swearing and cold as the waiter. I was actually amazed, I don't know what language it was but she spoke it like a native, it really took me back. I think it must have been French, because she was using her nose a lot. She spoke it so fast that it scared the waiter, and he was nicer to us after that. Of course Ace had had a good deal of special private tutoring, after all she was a doctor's daughter, and she had been to Europe and all that nonsense. She wouldn't have gone on her own. She was dragged around as if she were just an extra suitcase, they even told her what a good time she was having.

I think I know why the menu was in French. I bet some joker hired this French guy to do all the cooking and they probably couldn't get rid of him because he was a union man. They should have talked to me before they gave him the job. I know a guy in our hometown that is looking for work, old Tommy Pinch, he might drink a little but he makes one hell of a wicked hamburger. If that waiter hadn't given me such a rough time, I might have let them in on it, but to hell with them now.

First we had shrimp cocktails in giant silver glasses

that were filled with chipped ice. The sauce in the center was so hot that you had to drink water to stop yourself from burning up. We no sooner finished them than the waiter came out with a whole bushel basket full of greens. He must have thought that we were part horse, because he kept piling it on our plates until it was falling over on the white tablecloth, the damn fool just wouldn't stop. He wouldn't let the rest just sit there either, he charged into it as if it were his worst enemy. He stabbed it and knifed it, and ripped it to shreds. The way he was flying all over the place, I thought he would end up along with it on the floor or toss himself into the center of the huge bowl. But somehow he didn't. He gave it a couple of more good hatch cuts that would have driven any good wrestler to the canvas, and then he started talking to it in French. The only thing I understood was when he was pouring some yellow and blood-red oils all over it and he said, "*Coup de grâce.*" The only reason I knew what that was is because it's what the Germans would say after they shot a prisoner in an Errol Flynn picture. So now that the salad had been killed and murdered, I swear I was looking for him to make the sign of the cross over it. I guess he must have been sacrilegious because he served it to us without another word, those French guys are that way, I guess, but if you want my personal opinion I think he was just too damn tired.

Finally the steaks came sizzling on steel plates, thick and red and soft to cut into. They had little fires under them, mine went on burning long after Ace's and Worm's. They both kept glancing over at mine and were happy to see the warm orange flame burning a hell of a long time but that waiter just couldn't stand to see it still burning. He

came all the way from the kitchen with a little steel cup with a long handle on it. I wondered what it was for. He smiled and put out my little flame, turned on his heels and went right back to his rotten kitchen. I called out, "Hey, watch it, buddy," but he zoomed through the swinging door and probably reported to that French cook that he had accomplished his mission. Maybe they knew that I was part German, and were getting even for the last war. You never can tell with these French, they can be pretty sneaky.

We had ice cream with cream de menthe spilled all over the top and coffee with double cream. Old Ace stuck with her black coffee. I pulled out my Fatima cigarettes, they were pretty beaten up because I must have been sitting on them on the train. I asked the waiter if he would get me some Fatima cigarettes and the damn fool snickered. If we were not kind of on the run, I would have clouted the bastard, bigger than me or not. He had been asking for it all night.

Ace said something to him in French and he came back with a package of Pall Mall cigarettes and gave them to us. I don't know what powers Ace had, but they always worked. I gave Worm a glance, she looked as if she had gained fifty pounds right on the spot. Her lips were swollen shut. She had a dreamy look on her face, it was the first time I had ever seen it. I knew that she didn't eat too well, so this was all a big treat for her. I lighted up my cigarette and offered them around but I had no takers.

The cigarette smoke only added to the comfortable full atmosphere that was all around us. Even the candles seemed fatter, their yellow flames glowing with thick sleepy beams that were getting weaker and weaker. My cigarette too seemed fat and heavy on my lips. I looked across the table

that was now covered with stains from our food. It looked like a battlefield after a war. Old Ace was finishing off her coffee and I blew my smoke in her direction, and raised my head a little so that she would know that it was a special message. It rose and huddled for a second around her warm coffee cup. She tipped it up, Ace was drinking smoke.

I didn't want to go, the waiter had enough sense not to come around, I felt tired and filled with country sleep. Most of the people were gone, and the few that were still there lowered their voices to an almost even hum. School seemed a long ways away and I was glad of that, I was being irresponsible again and it was wonderful. It was wonderful to know that I didn't have to go to school tomorrow or go anywhere if I didn't want to. I did not know exactly what our plans were, our future was sort of up in the air (up in the air, hell I am afraid it was out of this solar system, I think some green-eyed monster was toying around with it, it sure was no place in front of us).

The waiter came and asked us if there was anything more we wanted. I felt like a good cigar, but I thought he might refuse me, just as I was sure that the rat would refuse me a little liquid refreshment. But this was Chicago, and you never could tell.

"I would like a scotch-on-the-rocks and a good Conquistador." I tried to say it as nonchalant as I could. He began writing it down and talking and repeating it to himself.

"Scotch-on-the-rocks and one Conquistador, yes sir." He went away without another word. As I said, I am pretty tall and maybe that's what did it. Back home they would grab me by the back of the neck and toss me out in the

street. Maybe it was my deliberation. You see a lot of movies and you are bound to pick up something about acting. You got to speak slow, but firm, I tell that to all the guys that I meet. You see I have always had a secret desire to get the youth of America drunk. Isn't that a high-class plan. How many kids my age would think of such a bright idea like that?

The old waiter came back with my Scotch and my smoke and set them in front of me. "Will that be all?" he asked, almost like Mr. Henry might pull when he was dragging you over the coals.

I let him wait a minute as I lighted my cigar, and then I tipped my chair back a little just to let him know who was boss. "Yeah, that's all, unless you got some Egyptian belly dancers around here somewhere." Obviously he did not appreciate my terribly witty remark. He just slapped the bill on my side of the table, I think that he wished it had been my face, and took off in a big huff. I looked at the bill, it was pretty scary. I folded it into a single-point downdraft Messerschmidt and floated it over to Ace. She didn't even have to touch it, it made a perfect three-point landing next to Ace's empty coffee cup. Damn, I tell you I should have been a pilot in the German Army.

Ace paid the bill and we left the goldfishes and the green palm leaves and the smiling waiter (who stopped smiling when he saw that we didn't leave him a penny of tip for his trouble), and the colored busboy who was clearing another table next to the door. This time I gave him a real I-am-a-white-man look, but the damn fool smiled and shot at me with a long pointed finger from his hip. He made a noise with his mouth that sounded just like a .45. He was a good shot, it got me right in the heart, I just had to smile.

The rotten waiter of course saw all of this, but the colored guy was way ahead of him. He brought his invisible .45 up to his mouth and emptied the rest of the gun into the waiter's stomach. Of course the waiter didn't think anything other than that the busboy was clearing his throat. He sure was dumb.

Out on the street, the cool Chicago air came off the dark lake and flowed through our hair like something on the run and hiding. Where the park had been was now a chunk of black empty space. It looked as though all you had to do was cross Michigan Avenue and you would step into the end of the world.

We began walking up the street towards the tall buildings and the bright lights of the Pepsi-Cola sign. Almost all of the tall buildings were flooded with spotlights and some of the lights spilled over the tops of the buildings and on into the clouds. The three of us were walking abreast with me on the inside and Worm in the middle and Ace nearest the curb. I puffed on my big old fat cigar and for some damn reason felt happy. Here we were in Chicago, I could hardly believe it. Everything looked like something to do. I wanted to walk into the dark park and down to the black water. I wanted to walk to the tall buildings with their flooding lights. I wanted to cut down the side streets that were full of noise and overhead trains.

"Well," said Worm, saying the first words since we had left the restaurant, "well, here we are, let's go through the park and see if we can see anything in the water." Her voice was high just like a little child's.

"What do you expect to see?" asked Ace as we turned to cross the street that was now almost empty of all cars. Just a few taxis were roaming around looking for fares.



"Oh, I don't know." Worm laughed as she went walking a little bit ahead and into the dark park. This gave me a chance to get a couple of fast words across to Ace without hurting Worm's feelings.

"Look," I whispered to Ace, keeping one good eye on Worm, "here we come all the way from Michigan to see my old man and to get away from that crumby town, and what do we do. We go down to the lake to see if we can see Michigan. I mean I don't want to sound too concerned, but we got to get a place to stay, and then we got to locate my old man. Damn, Ace, I bet they got the cops on our ass right now, and where do you always find cops, in parks."

I was just talking to myself and I knew it, but Ace listened and waited until I was through and then she said, "Are you through," and I said yes and all she said was "All right then." That wasn't an answer, but that was Ace's answer. I guess it was mystical because I didn't understand it. I just went along with it.

We came to a large fountain that wasn't working and it sat silent and still under the stars. God I hate to see that, they should have some guy in charge of things like that. A guy to see all the movies that no one sees any more, to listen to all the music that nobody ever plays, and to keep the fountains flowing even in the darkness of the night so some poor sap won't come and see it still and silent against the sky. I tell you it almost drives you out of your mind. Just don't let things like that go.

Worm was still running on ahead and Ace and I walked together in the damp grass. I wanted to talk a little bit about what we should do first. We could get a room at the YMCA, my brother told me it was such a liberal place that they even allowed girls. Maybe then we could take in two

or three movies. It was a little late to try and find my father, I thought it would be best if we did that in the morning. Of course we had the cops to worry about, but I don't think that they would think we had come all the way to Chicago. In a couple of weeks I would send my mother a note saying that everything was all right and not to worry. Of course we couldn't send it from Chicago, they would have the FBI on us in no time. I knew a kid in New Mexico and I would send him a letter with the letter to my mother inside. I would just tell him to drop it in a mailbox for me and that would take care of that. Ace said that as far as she was concerned her parents could think she was dead. I thought she was a little hard, but that's the way she wanted it. I think all of this was scaring Worm, but I wasn't sure, she was acting a little bit too silent for comfort. Of course I've got no business passing judgment on another person's mind, only slimy rats do that.

We came to a very busy highway that ran next to the lake and we had to wait at the side of it until a million cars went by. Their lights were shining in our faces like the eyes of glowing bugs and they shot by in a mass, yet each one with its own little wind. I honestly believed that if you were to step in front of them they would mow you down like the rabbits you see all along our highways in Michigan. They would mash you right into the cement until you were nothing but guts and blood. We dashed across just as a new group of cars came like an army, almost on top of us, and made it to the other side.

All of a sudden everything was different. The sound of the cars seemed to faint away as we walked down some steps that led to the choppy water. Even the darkness was

different, it was closer to you and safer. You could hear the water slapping and cracking against the cement walls. You could see the ghostly outlines of the sailboats. You could see lights way out over the dark water giving signals to each other, it was all quieter and larger and less cut up. It all fitted together and there was nothing harsh to run you down. Everything stayed in its place, except the stars. They were getting mixed up with the lights over the water and all of it was wet and drowning and I felt myself getting mad again.

## IX

We got our rooms at the YMCA, and my brother was right, they even let girls in, but they had a floor all to themselves. I don't think they were dumb enough to let them use the swimming pool, not if it was anything like the one back home, we don't wear bathing suits there.

My room turned out to be a closet with a number on it. The bed, with a green cover, was on one side of the wall and took up easily half the room. There was a small passage with a tiny green rug that ran to a window that wouldn't open. Against the other long wall there was a desk, a chair and a wardrobe that looked as though they were all grown together, but the chair worked.

I decided to get cleaned up a little before we went looking for my father. Ace had bought me a few things that I needed, such as a toothbrush that you could fold like a jackknife, it was a real space saver in a room like mine. Our school was one of those progressive ones and you had to wear dress pants and a tie and a white shirt, what that had to do with being progressive I don't know, but we had to wear them. My shirt was getting kind of messy after that long trip, so Ace had also bought me another shirt along with a pair of white wool socks and even a couple of pairs of shorts. The shorts were Worm's idea, holy Jesus that girl thinks of everything.

I hardly dared to look in the wardrobe, somehow they might have worked a bathroom in there or at least a stand-up shower, but there wasn't. All that was there was some hangers and the odor of mothballs. They had the towel rack in there too for some reason, and I took out the bath towel and closed the door. I found a bar of soap in the desk next to a DO NOT DISTURB sign (so I didn't) and closed the desk flat against the wall. You had to close it because with the desk open the chair slammed against the bed and you couldn't move.

After looking out the window at the fire escape, and looking under the bed, and giving a quick glance towards the wastebasket, I decided that the bathroom must be somewhere out in the hall. It was, I found a sign with the words MEN'S ROOM in big black letters. Inside the swinging door that was just like the door going from our dining room to the kitchen, I found what I was looking for, in fact more than I was looking for. It was a long narrow room with about a million mirrors, and a million sinks, and a million stalls, each with its own swinging door. Half of them were

marked shower and the other half toilets, it looked like a hundred of our boys' rooms at school put together.

There were men shaving and others walking in and out of the stalls, most of them with little more than their white bath towels wrapped around their thick bodies. All the towels had the bold red letters of the YMCA printed across the whole length of the towel, it all sure looked stupid. I hate looking at fat people without any clothes on, and also that type of joker with nothing but hair from head to foot. There was even one guy that had hair on his back, it sure was disgusting. I didn't want to join in this gay group, they all looked as if they were really enjoying themselves. I caught a couple of guys looking at me through the mirrors, and it made me mad.

I went back to my room and got my soap and towel, maybe I could just wash up without taking my shirt off. It wasn't that I was ashamed of my body, that wasn't it, in fact I was pretty well built for a tall guy, I even lifted weights at the gym in school, but I can't stand some bastard staring at me when I undress. I didn't like it when my brothers were around, or even at school when we were forced to take showers after gym. Why do people like to look at each other when they haven't any clothes on anyway?

I stood by the showers not knowing quite what to do. A sign over a bunch of hooks said WATCH YOUR KEY AND CLOTHES, so I did that for a while. I looked at my key for a moment with the big paddle that gave the number of my room, but it didn't help too much, I still didn't like the place. Guys were hanging up their clothes and towels and stepping into the shower stalls without any clothes on, it didn't seem to bother them.

I went into one of the stalls that was half open and closed the door behind me. There was no place to hang my clothes so I just laid them all on my shoes near the door where they wouldn't get too wet. There wasn't a lock on the door. Anybody could come barging in and you couldn't stop them. What a hell of a way to run a hotel. I turned on the shower and let the warm water run all down me, it felt good. That is, it felt good until some character took the next stall. As soon as he turned on his water, mine went cold. No sooner had I readjusted the water than the creep would change his, and I had to jump out or I would have been burned alive. To add to all of this, some guys kept pushing on my door to see if my shower was in use. They could easily see the steam rolling out. They would come out with this weak sloppy excuse that it had been an accident, "Oh, pardon me," or "Is this in use?" "Who is in there?" all kinds of stupid questions. One guy kept asking, "Is that you, Harry?" I didn't answer the creep. I just pretended that I was invisible and after a while he went away.

I noticed through the steam that Harry had written his name and room number on the wall for some stupid reason. There were other things on the wall too, not at all like in the boy's washroom at school. Hell, back home I would write a few lines of poetry and I wasn't above a good old-fashioned fuck-you. But these walls were stupid. There were just some names and numbers, and some pictures of boys that seemed to me kind of pointless. There was nothing like a naked girl, like you would expect, nothing like that at all.

I put my tie back on before I stepped out of the shower. They probably thought it was kind of odd to see a fully dressed boy stepping out of the shower, acting as if it was

the most normal thing in the world, but I didn't care. I don't exactly call writing your name and room number on a shower wall very down-to-earth, or drawing a lot of nude men. Hell, after all, there were no girls around to see it, it was just a big fat waste of time. I have nothing against a few good pictures on bathroom walls, but if you are going to draw them, draw something interesting. Maybe a picture of Mr. Henry with a rope around his neck or a German Messerschmidt in a crash dive or even a warm friendly greeting like drop dead, or dry up and blow away, things like that make some sense.

Ace and Worm were supposed to meet me in the lobby in an hour. When I got down there I found them sitting in a café off the lobby drinking black coffee.

"Park yourself, Joko, and have some nourishment," said Worm as she pulled out a chair next to hers. I sat down but I wasn't in the mood for coffee. I pulled out the Pall Malls and lighted one up. They were all right I guess, but I would rather have had my Fatimas. The beat-up pack was still in my back pocket, and when I took it out it dumped tobacco all over my pants. If you think keeping cigarettes in your back pocket is stupid, then you don't know Miss Booboo. If you carried them in your shirt pocket like a normal human being, you ran the risk of losing them pocket and all, you also had more than an even chance of getting kicked out of school, or at least sitting in the office. I got in the habit of carrying them in my back pocket because she didn't think of looking there. When you carried them there, you were pretty safe, it looked just like a wallet or a pad of paper. Somehow in her misplaced mind Miss Booboo was going to save the world by stealing cigarettes



from us kids, and there isn't a doubt in my mind that the old gal smoked them herself in the teachers' toilet. She had the yellowest fingers I had ever seen in my life.

I jammed the Pall Mall into the ashtray and lighted up one of my own Basil Rathbone Fatima cigarettes. It was a lot better, it was strong, but it was more my line.

"You look all right," said Ace giving me a smile and a sparkle from her dark blue eyes all at once, "even with that broken-down cigarette. I thought you would like the Pall Malls." Her tone was full of softness and concern. I liked that in Ace. It didn't take the end of the world to move and bother her. A thing as small as not liking the cigarettes that she bought me could bother the holy Jesus right out of her. I bet if she were to see the end of the world coming she would gravitate one of her little smiles that could mow you down. Big things never got in her way, of course the end of the world did not come too often. Only when someone looked at her because her body was a young girl's or when someone tried to talk to her seriously about a lot of stupid junk, or when her parents told her how much they were always doing for her or how lucky she was and slop like that; no, the end of the world was a long way away, it just came a million times a day.

I will tell you something that might set you back a little bit, that might break you down, that surely will make you as mad as Mother Booboo would get when she found cigarettes on you. I don't think that Ace belonged in this world. When she was really a kid, I used to catch her all the time holding her breath, and when I asked her why she did that, she said it was because she wanted to die. Of course holding your breath is sort of silly, but the wish was there. It was why she liked sitting in the dark, it was why she would

go for hours without saying a word. I know it's scary, but it's true. She even used to take all kinds of aspirin with Cokes and black coffee, or hold a pillow over her face. Of course none of it would ever work and maybe it was just kid stuff, and maybe it wasn't. I know that everybody says that if a person wants to die, he will and the rest is all acting and showing off or a way of getting attention. But there is no point in doing it in the dark and silence of your bedroom, no point at all.

"Pall Malls are all right, Ace, you know they are all right, but when you get all caught up with these Turkish brands, it's worse than taking it in the arm. I am giving a lot of serious thought to going to Lexington for the cure, it's become so bad that I am getting Parkinson's disease."

I began shaking my shoulders and bobbing my head to show her just how bad it was. Ace and Worm were both impressed. Of course the rest of the people in the café were trying their damndest not to look at me, after all a nice-looking young boy is bound to be pretty sensitive about such an unfortunate break. I can give you the best imitation of a spastic with a broken leg that you have ever seen, of course it is not exactly in demand right now, but I keep in practice just in case.

Worm wanted to go to an all-night movie, but Ace pointed out that they might not let us in because of our ages and the time of the night, it was getting pretty late. The café was all but empty and out in the lobby I could see a lot of people going up to the desk for their room keys or running to catch the elevator. Even the Chinese who had been hanging around the lobby with their cameras were beginning to disappear. The police are way off the track when it comes to them, they're always on the lookout for Ger-

man and Russian spies, I tell you watch these Chinamen. I saw one taking a picture of a sign just a couple of days ago, no kidding, it was a big sign of some insurance office and he was getting a cameraful, all at different angles too.

Back home there is a Chinaman that lives just down the block and the police caught him stealing ducks with a guinea bag out in Franklin Park. Of course when they caught him red-handed he denied the whole thing, he said that it was a conspiracy and that someone had framed him. He had bread crumbs in his pockets and three ducks in his bag, how the hell more framed can you get?

"Why don't we see if we can at least find the place that my dad stays at," I said, noticing a Chinaman walking around doing nothing except staring at me a lot. "I think we better get out of here, if you know what I mean."

I finished off my coffee almost in a whisper. I picked up my mashed pack of Fatima cigarettes and pushed back my chair in the empty café, it made a rotten noise against the stone floor. Of course they had no idea what I meant because both of them had their backs turned to the lobby door and couldn't see what I saw. The café had a door that led to the street, but it was closed so we had to go through the lobby. The Chinaman was standing right by the door and when we passed him he smiled. I knew there was something wrong, otherwise why would he smile, Chinamen don't smile for nothing. When you see that broad yellow grin watch out, usually a knife follows, it happens all the time. Well, we got out on the street all right without a knife in our backs. Ace and Worm didn't notice a thing, but that's the way the Chinese work, you never know that they are around, until you feel the bite of their dagger in your back, and then of course it's too late.

We decided to begin our search for my father's hotel in the Loop because it was the busiest part of town and besides, the directions that we were given by people on the street were a little confusing.

Don't ask me why it's called the Loop, I have no idea nor do I think anyone else does. Some guy on the street told us that it was named after William Loop, a very famous American explorer who was killed by a drunken Indian right on the spot where the tallest building now sits. Then he asked us if we would give him some money because he hadn't had a thing to eat in four days. We didn't much care for the history lesson but we gave him all kinds of money because we knew he was lying, he was lying about wanting the money for food and also about William Loop. Besides, I have always been on the side of derelicts and tramps and crooks and traitors because I will end up just like them. Anyway I like them, I always like drunks that don't take any crap from anyone, they are way ahead of the human race.

As far as I am concerned, drinking is the only legitimate reason to ask a stranger for money. If he had been stone-sober, he wouldn't have got a dime from us. My father once told me that our Constitution should also guarantee the right to drunkenness, and the right to beg (and the duty of others to give) enough money for another drink. You can always get enough to eat but I have yet to see a mission or the Salvation Army give a responsible gentleman what he really needs. When it comes to reform, I tell you a drink is worth ten thousand words.

Another guy we asked for directions was about to give us a smash on the head with a wine bottle for our trouble. Some people hate kids, you know, I would be the same in his place, but I would use bricks instead of wine bottles, because of their world-famous resilience.

I think we were really more interested in seeing a little bit of the night life of Chicago, which is whispered about even in our small town, than finding my father. Don't get me wrong, we wanted to find my father but we could do that tomorrow. We were all getting a little tired too, either that, or the excitement was too much for us. After all, for Worm and myself it was the first time away from home.

The autumn night was cool and the neon lights all around us were smashing into the sky like fireworks. We were no longer on Michigan Avenue, but the next street over and we could see it when we came to each corner. We felt attached to that street, because they were kind enough to name it after our state, and because it looked on our lake, and because of the postcard and the lions and the long dark green park with the huge statues and fountains that didn't work at night.

The street that we were on was Wabash, and the sky was hidden by an overhead train that clicked and pounded and made enough noise to wake the dead. It even showered down sparks as it went by. We were the only ones that knew that it was up there, every time it went by we would look up and watch, the rest of the people just didn't pay any attention. I guess you got used to it if you saw it all the time. I never would, it was a very exciting thing to see. I know now what they mean by the night life of Chicago, that train really was big and beautiful riding against the night sky the way it was doing. It looked like it could take you up to heaven if you wanted to go there. I have always been in favor of trains as it is, but one that zooms all around at night over Chicago is something to stagger a boy from the country. Of course I am not really from the country but our crumbly town is so small it might as well be, it's sure full of hicks.

I was bowled over by the number of movie houses that we passed, the town was loaded with them. I have always had greedy eyes for Hollywood and believed in my heart of hearts that I was born to be a movie star. I guess that it's not an original thought. I am sure that it has entered the heads of all good-looking guys from the beginning of time. I know that if John the Baptist was as good-looking as they make him in the movies, he sure would have gone to Hollywood. I knew that my father was interested in Hollywood. When he was home he used to look in the mirror a lot, he was almost as bad as me when it came to mirror time. I can say with a humble smile that four of my young years were spent looking at myself in mirrors, and in the reflection of picture windows, I even try to look at myself on the surface of water. I join it together with my irresponsibility. With enough of it, you could conquer the world, that is, if your interest lies along that line, and mine sure does.

Don't think I just take Hollywood blindly and make it an answer for everything I want. But it's part of it, just like Ty Cobb and Rogers Hornsby are part of how I believe human beings should live. If I tell you a little story about it maybe you will get what I mean. Anyone that knows sports probably heard it before, but I will tell it anyway, just for the old ladies on those long Mediterranean cruises. I am sure they would want to hear about Ty Cobb and Rogers (or the Rajah as he was known).

Well, to begin with, Ty Cobb had a lifetime batting average of .367, which if you don't know it is just something out of this world. If you ever happen to be in the neighborhood of the Hall of Fame, pay it a visit. Inside on this one wall they have a brass plaque with the names of all the baseball greats, and do you know whose name is No. 1 on that list,

believe it or not, it is Tyrus Raymond Cobb. His name is even over Babe Ruth's and you know what kind of a ball-player he was. It would seem that old Tyrus had one drawback, he wasn't such a nice guy. To be that and still be considered the very greatest that has ever lived is a pretty hard thing to do. I mean, to have everyone hate you and still call you great is difficult, it's kind of forcing your enemies to admit that they love you.

Well, Cobb was enjoying another good year with the Tigers, but his legs were giving out a little. Along came a young streak of lightning called the Rajah. The two men had two things in common. They were both the best, when there was only room for one, and they both took to each other right off. In other words, they hated each other's guts.

I don't want to go into the whole history of their dandy little relationship, but I will tell one incident of their kindness towards each other. Well, it would seem that Cobb did a little spiking now and again (which in a way is a slander, because he was spiked as much as he spiked others) but the Rajah wasn't above some good old playful cutting up himself. This one time an unusual amount of hate was generated between these two. The Rajah was covering second base and Cobb was hanging around on first. It seems that he shouted down the baseline to let the Rajah know that he was there. He yelled down to him, "Hey Hornsby I am coming in, do you hear me Hornsby," and the Rajah heard him and yelled back waving his fist down at first. "Go ahead come on in," and of course old Cobb came in with a burst of his heart and speed. He came in as he always came with his spikes in the general direction of the good gentleman's reproductive organs. Of course he knew that he was out before he even left first base and that there wasn't a

chance of making it safely. The Rajah knew it too and so did everyone else. They knew why he was coming in. Well, the ball reached the Rajah's hand just as the image of this mass of dust and cloth and grinning face came to him in the corner of his eye. The Rajah didn't back off a bit, and as Cobb slid into him, Hornsby came down with the full force of the ball on top of Cobb's head. He not only wanted him out at second but out of the damn universe as well. They both went down in a tangle of arms and legs and Hornsby came crawling out with a grin full of dust and sunshine. Cobb was out at second and it was just another summer afternoon to most people, just another day to eat, and drink and sleep, and one man had beat another down and it was all fair.

So you see when I talk about Cobb or Flynn, I just don't mean the stupid and boring part that goes along with it all, I mean the flash, the thunder, the large and massive parts. Those moments when you put down the toys and pick up the axes, when you are stabbing and cutting and ripping away and you don't protest because there is no one to protest to. Well, I better stop this before I get upset, but I won't explain it away. I won't explain why a young boy should know this sort of thing, I won't say that it doesn't mean anything, because it does, and I am sick unto death with all our lives being happy endings when they're not; Ty Cobb is getting old and he is sick all the time and that's part of why we are here in Chicago, and who will understand that if you tell them. I don't want to talk about it any more, the subject is cheering you up too much, and it's pure murder like everything is when you think about it too long.





We didn't look for my father that night, it was getting pretty late, so we thought we'd have a fresh start in the morning. Finding my father turned out to be much harder than I thought. There is one drawback in being impractical, but really it's not a drawback at all because it's kind of exciting. I have been known a few times to bump into walls, step out into traffic, take wrong turns and end up in a dead-end alley, things like that make you think though, it's like going through a fun house, you don't know what will be next. Trick mirrors, flashing lights, booming horns, murder and kidnaping around every corner, old ladies, shaking their long bony fingers, canes with hidden knives, I tell you being impractical just fills your life with meaning.

I admit that sometimes it's the long way around. I should have checked my father's address, for example, it was on the back of the postcard, but when we went there we were kind of shook up.

It seems that the Cody Hotel was in the process of being torn down. The city fathers of Chicago were out of their minds (this is how our taxi driver told it to me) and were going to clean up the slums. With one giant stroke they were going to wipe out poverty, rats, cockroaches, derelicts, drunks, the Salvation Army, the Haven of Rest, unemployment, communism, thieves, rapers, shoplifting, juvenile delinquency, Daughters of the American Revolution, corrupt detectives and anyone that tried to get smart with them, including punk kids that went around beating up cops.

It was a wonderful idea but like most good ideas it didn't work at all. They built great big huge apartments that were clean and modern for about a week. Then everything moved bodily into the apartments, including the cockroaches and rats and punk kids who stopped beating up cops and were now kidnaping them instead, and holding them for ransom, which brought the FBI who had evidence that the teamsters as well as the Communist party were behind it all. But the lawyers of the teamsters had evidence that the FBI is anti-Semitic and deals in white slavery so all charges were dropped and the kidnaped cops were forgotten about because they were brutal and colored anyway.

"Chicago is all turned around, huh?" I said.

"Turned around," yelled the cab driver to us in the back seat, "you're kidding, it's Washington that's turned around."

"What has Washington got to do with Chicago?" I asked the fat cabbie who still hadn't found the Cody Hotel.

"It's not Washington, it's those corrupt Republicans in Washington." He blew his horn and shouted at an old lady at the same time. I don't think she got hit by our cab but it didn't matter, the horn and the swearing cab driver gave her what looked like a heart attack and a stroke at the same time. She just jerked her old body back on the curb and stood stone-white on the spot. The cabby laughed.

"Haha. You know, people bug me." He shot around another corner and almost ran the cab into a truck going the other way.

"What has corrupt Republicans got to do with Chicago?" I asked, still trying to understand his first statement. "Is Chicago full of Republicans?" Old Worm was paying no attention to us at all, she was hanging her head out the window like a dog and letting the breeze blow her hair back, she was having a wonderful time.

"Republicans, what are you some kind of nut, Chicago is Democratic."

"What has corrupt Republicans got to do with it?" I wasn't giving up.

"Look Mac, I didn't make the world either, I just drive a cab. Here's the Cody Hotel."

We pulled to a halt in front of a bombed-out building and got out, it sure looked like a nice place to live, a lot like Berlin after the war.

"Two eighty-five," said the cabby, sticking out his thick paw.

"The meter says a dollar eighty-five," Ace zoomed back, giving him two dollar bills.

"Yeah, but it don't work right," said the cabby.

"Neither do you," said Worm, staring at him as if he were her old man, "and we want the fifteen cents change."

He took out fifteen cents and handed it to Worm. "Well, if you can be bought for fifteen cents," he said angrily, "take it." He shot away pulling up half the pavement with him. All three of us burst out laughing and watched him disappear.

Workmen were ripping down the walls and pulling up the floors of the Cody Hotel. We asked some guy with a steel helmet what was it all about and were they remodeling the place.

"We're tearing it down, buddy," he said through the dust and shouting voices.

I told him that I couldn't hear him. Worm almost walked into a big hole in the floor and the guy pulled her back. "Watch it, kid, this place has been bought by Urban Renewal." She stepped back and was almost knocked down by some guy walking around with a board on his shoulder.

"But what about my dad?" I shouted at him. "He used to live here, he sent me a postcard and it had this address on the back."

The man with this crazy steel helmet looked at the postcard and told me that the art museum was downtown on Michigan.

"I know that," I said getting mad, "but he used to live here." I pointed to the floor.

"Oh," he said, finally understanding what I was getting at. "Hey, Tom, what happened to the jokers that used to live here?" he shouted to a guy that I hadn't even seen before who was near the ceiling playing around with some wires.

"You mean all those old farts, they were relocated," he said with as little interest as he could possibly show.

"They were relocated," the guy with the steel hat said.

"Where?" I shouted. He had a hard time understanding

me but he could hear every word the guy up at the ceiling was saying, and here I was standing right next to him. I had to repeat it a couple of times before he understood.

"Hey, Tom, where were they relocated?" he almost whispered but Tom heard him.

"The Greater Cody Hotel," he answered and then shouted, "Heads up!"

Everybody put their heads down so only their steel helmets were showing and the three of us looked up. A big steel and glass chandelier came crashing down three feet from us.

"You kids get out of here," said some fat guy with a cigar growing out of his mouth, "go play someplace else."

We asked him where the Greater Cody Hotel was and he told us just around the corner. As we were leaving someone else shouted heads up but we weren't going to be tricked by that again, we just shot out of there.

We walked around for a while but couldn't find the Greater Cody Hotel. Then we went back to the YMCA because we were all so tired, and do you know there were even a couple of Chinamen still in the lobby with their cameras and leather straps all over the place.

We spent the afternoon wandering around looking for my father's hotel, it turned out to be five blocks from where that fat guy with the cigar had said, but it was close to the lake, so everything was all right. I went in the hotel and asked for my father. He lived there, thank God, but they told me that he had left a message not to be disturbed until he called down. I told the old lady behind the desk that I was his son, but I don't think that she believed me. I asked if he was all right and not sick or anything like that. I think

she took it as a personal insult and ignored me. I asked again and this time she told me that if I continued to bother her she would report me to the cook in the restaurant. What the cook had to do with the hotel I didn't find out because she picked up the earphones on the switchboard when I asked her if I could leave a message. That's the trouble with adults, you can never get them to quit clowning around.

We took another taxi back to the Loop by way of the outer drive and decided to get our problem straightened out by taking in a couple of good movies. You can think better in a movie house, it's always dark and silent.

The first movie was a war picture but it was very tiring because you knew that the Americans would win, even when it looked hopeless and the Japanese were torturing the matinee idol half to death, you knew that he would end up kicking this ugly Jap's face in, and he did too, he even spit in it. The Jap had been educated at Oxford and they used to play football or some damn thing together and he softened just for a second, that is all that an American needs, he got the poor ugly little Jap in a hold that would mystify the best wrestler in the world and escaped with the plans that would save England, after blowing up most of Tokyo. Don't ask me where they escaped to, they were in the heart of Tokyo. They dashed out of the door with this gun that never ran out of ammunition and "The Star-Spangled Banner" playing all over the damn place, we left, it was sickening.

One nice thing about Chicago, the movie houses are close together. When we got back out on the street it was raining and the streets were shiny. Ace suggested that we go back to the North Side to see if my father had come down from his room yet. I think that Ace was eager to meet my father, she wanted to know where we stood. We couldn't

keep on going to shows for the rest of our lives. I could, it was all right with me, but Ace wanted to either get in with my father and live in Chicago or head farther west, out Hollywood way perhaps. I don't think that Worm was as hot as when we first started, maybe she was homesick. How you could ever get homesick for a falling-down dirty house and a kick in the face, I can't really say, but I guess it's possible. When you are as young as we are, it's easy to be confused and turned around.

Not that I think our leaving home was a confused and turned-around thing. If anything, it was one of the few worthwhile deals I ever got into. There are things I won't do, and knuckling under for Mr. Henry or Miss Booboo is one of them, it's a good policy. Of course Mother Booboo will say that running away is not facing up to your problem. But when the problem is strong enough to almost wipe you off the face of the earth, it's the only thing to do. Besides, I am tired of people picking on me. They have failed and I haven't had a chance to fail yet, but they want to make damn sure I do. Of course, everyone will say that is part of my dirty imagination, what can such a little nothing know about anything. Let me tell you that is playing right into Mother Booboo's hands, that is her thinking right down the line, holy Jesus, it's become a broken record.

We didn't go to the first show we came to because we had plenty of time. Worm thought it would be a good idea if we killed a few hours and went back to the North Side, around dinnertime. That would give my father a chance to come down and maybe go and eat (or drink) something for dinner, and also it would allow the shifts to change at the desk and get that clown off the switchboard. By the time we planned to get back there, they should have the night clerk on, and usually (if I can depend on movies) they are old

worn-out people who don't care what you do if you only slip them a couple of dollars.

I like walking in the rain, but I never tell anyone because everybody else does. Ace is jumpy on that subject too, I have yet to see her step around a puddle when she can walk through it, one time she even waded right into Lake Michigan with all her clothes on, it was a nice thing to do, I am glad that there are some people that still have some sense.

We were walking on Michigan Avenue and the damn old park was right across the street again, and do you know what, the fountain was working, right in the rain, it was the damndest thing in the world, it made me happy, things like that do sometimes.

We passed one of those little movie houses that have pictures all the way from Europe. Usually I do not like to go to them because they are the sort of junk that a schoolteacher is interested in, all that culture and sex, people talking in bed, it's pretty disgusting. But this was an old picture that I saw one time on television. The name of it was *The Red Shoes* and I have to admit that I liked it. It was on The Late Late Show a couple of years ago and my father got me up to see it. I don't think he knew exactly what he was doing at the time because I think he was drunk. It was right after he came home from New York to take a cure for his drinking. He had just lost another job that he had and everyone in the house was pretty much down on him. He was supposed to get to bed early, because he had to see about this new job in the morning, but here he was sitting in front of that beat-up old television watching the show, drunk to the gills. I was in love with him that night and when he got me to see this picture I knew that I always would be, he has class.



I told Worm and Ace that it was one of the best pictures I had ever seen, even though it had nothing to do with sports or Errol Flynn. They went in with me, more to get dry than anything else, the rain was falling like a madman by that time.

Everyone thinks it is a love story about a girl who was a dancer, but it has nothing to do with that at all. Sure, the girl and the young songwriter are supposed to be in love and spooky stuff like that, but that's just for the old maids and the married old maids. It is really about this Frenchman who is being cut down by a junky bunch of nobodies. He lives in one world and that one world is all by itself, and he is sitting precariously on the edge of that world with absolutely nothing under him, absolutely nothing. Yet he is calm and cool as hell, calm and cool, that is, between the moments when everything isn't cutting him up and down. What a change, what a change to find for once a movie that isn't just a lot of movement that has nothing to do with anything. Don't get me wrong, I am not suddenly junking Errol Flynn movies, that's a different thing altogether, his movies are not out to feed you a lot of slop, all he does is knock women around and steal and murder, they don't try to brainwash you or anything like that.

We saw the picture twice before we went back to the North Side, it is the kind of picture you really like to talk about but if you do you ruin everything so we just walked back out into the Chicago night with the black street and the rain looking fresh and unreal.

Worm and Ace waited in the coffee shop next door when we got back to my father's hotel. In the lobby I noticed that the old lady was no longer on the switchboard. This time I had a little better plan for my attack. I was not going to be

put off, after all what kind of a world is it where you cannot see your father without everyone thinking that you are nothing but a liar.

It was an old hotel, older than the one they were tearing down. At one time it must have been new and rich, it had that old-fashioned furniture that is so fat and heavy, you would think it was born or had grown on the spot, no one could have put it there. The lobby even had old-fashioned lights that seemed to give off nothing but shadows and darkness and the pictures on the walls as well as the rugs on the floor looked faded and gloomy. I almost felt as if I was going into an old movie house. In a dead and spooky way it was all right. I usually go for things like that, a place where outside everything is bustling and glaring and inside everything is at a standstill, as if almost forgotten, and liking it too.

At the desk, the night clerk had his back turned to me and I just stood there waiting for him to turn around. He sure had a big head from the back. He was either working on something or just standing there sleeping, he sure wasn't holding down his business at the desk. I could have easily pocketed the pen and he would never have known it. Just to let him know I was around I began whistling a little song that is pretty old, "Hutsut ralsen sitting on the rillera and a brawla brawla suet," it's one of those songs that carry a secret message, in fact it's so secret that nobody knows what it means, it's my kind of song, the tune is even nice. But the guy still didn't turn around. It was getting on my nerves a little, I hoped he wasn't doing it on purpose, that I couldn't take. No one could take it if somebody decided to turn his back on them on purpose. I thought for one scary second that he was like everything else in the lobby, old and heavy and unmovable.

My whistling sounded like a bird in a huge canyon, it was long and even far away. The night clerk didn't move, I thought that if I had something I could throw it at him, not hard, just to let him know that I was there. Once I saw a man throw a piece of popcorn at a woman sitting in front of him at a movie house. He wanted to tell the lady to take off her hat. The lady got mad and called the manager and the guy was kicked out. It was just one silly piece of popcorn, it didn't hurt her in any way, he just wanted to get her attention, people are strange sometimes. You couldn't start a conversation with a guy's back, he should at least face you.

I was thinking of going out and coming in again with a lot of noise just so I wouldn't hurt the night clerk's feelings, after all he had a nice back of a neck. It would sure get me down to think that I was alone and some creepy little kid was watching me, it would be awful for both of us. Just as I turned to go, he shot his head around with one quick jerk and saw me. He gave out a little helpless noise that sounded like "Oh!" I wanted to apologize all over the place, but nothing came out.

"What is it you want?" he said sternly, completely recovering himself and acting like a businessman. He was short and stocky and had a face full of hard muscles. He looked like an ex-wrestler or an ex-something, not at all the kind of night clerk that you see in movies; there was nothing weak and white or slimy about him.

"I want to see somebody," I answered quickly. He looked at me as if he was going to hurdle the desk and put a strangle Nelson hold on me, his words even sounded that way.

"Who, kid?" he said a little softer and shifting his weight on his feet.

"My dad, he sent me a postcard from here with lions on it." God I say dumb things sometimes, I'm sure he didn't care if it had lions on it or not.

"Lions, huh. What's your dad's name?" He didn't think it was so dumb. Anyone else would have been mad a hundred times over by now. That's what I hate about adults, you begin talking to them and because you stutter a little bit or you say something that they don't think is important, they get impatient and start acting like idiots.

"William Noone, he is my father, and I came here this afternoon and the lady on the desk was going to call the cook if I didn't leave—"

He didn't wait for me to finish or maybe I had. "Oh, that's old weasel-ass, her husband owns this flea trap. Does your daddy know you are here?" He sat down at the switchboard as he was talking and looked at me from under a pair of heavy eyebrows, they really must have been great dust collectors.

I was going to give him a line about how my father had called and told me to come over and my mother was sick, and she gave me a very important message for him, but as usual when I have to, I can't think. Besides I didn't want to lie to this guy; maybe because he didn't make fun of me when I told him my father sent me a postcard with lions on it. "No," I said softly, not knowing what else to say.

"Well," he said, turning in his chair and facing the switchboard, "if old Jigsaw is your daddy, I am sure that he will want to see you," and he made the switchboard buzz in an even rhythm as he rang my father's room. The buzzing in the empty lobby sounded just like a mosquito. "He's up there all right," he said, pushing the lever harder, "he is up there, I know it." The way he was pushing on that lever, I

thought that he was going to break it. For a second he seemed to forget all about me, he was just mad because my father wasn't answering his phone.

"Maybe I can just go up to his room and knock on the door."

He pulled out the plug and the buzzing stopped. "No, you can't do that." He talked fast and tough. He seemed all right to me but you can never tell, maybe my father was drinking a little more than he should have and he didn't think that I should see him in such a condition. If I had to wait for my father to be sober before I could see him, I would have been an orphan from the day of my birth.

"So Jigsaw is your father. He's lived here for over three months and I didn't even know he was married." For some reason this seemed to amuse him, and he began shaking his head as if he was trying to wipe this very important fact from his mind. "Tell me something, kid," he continued blandly, "where in this world did he ever pick up that black bastard that always comes to see him?" By this time he had stopped shaking his head long enough to become serious.

For a moment I didn't understand. "What black bastard?" I said politely.

"That bastard that thinks he dresses so sharp. He has a whole mouthful of gold teeth."

"You don't mean Earnie, is Earnie here in Chicago?" I opened my eyes a little wider, because I was excited.

"If your Earnie is black, then he is in Chicago," said the night clerk.

Well, this was news to me, Earnie was his assistant and he went everywhere with my father on his selling campaigns. Old Earnie has peeped in and out of my childhood as much as anyone in the family. I know that I like him

better than I do any of my brothers. "Is Earnie staying here?" I asked, thinking at the same time that all I would have to do was see him and I could find out all I wanted to know about my father. Earnie would tell me everything, he was that kind of boogie.

"Are you kidding," said the night clerk looking at me as if I had said something stupid. "With old weasel-ass running the show, hell kid, if you as much as had a suntan you wouldn't get past the front door. Don't you know that this is a very high-class hotel?"

"No, I didn't know that," I said quickly. It was time for me to get Worm and Ace, I felt better when they were around. I told him that I would be back, that I had to go and get my friends. He didn't seem to hear me, and went right on with his work without paying too much attention to me. All he was doing was juggling a bunch of papers around, I was sure he was doing it for my sake.

I walked out and went to the café next door, Ace and Worm both smiled when they saw me. "What do you mean, you can't go up?" asked Worm impatiently. "Did you tell him that you just came two hundred miles for the express reason of seeing him, did you tell that to the night clerk, well did you?" That beat-up old Worm could be persistent sometimes, but those people from Europe are always that way.

"Now, I didn't exactly say that he said that I couldn't go up to see my father," I began, trying to calm her down, but when I see other people getting excited it usually rubs off on me, "I didn't exactly say that at all, in fact he said my father would be glad to see us. I told you that, Worm, you know I did, you forgot about that part, didn't you, he just said that Jigsaw wouldn't answer the phone." I was shaking like a leaf.

"Who is Jigsaw?" asked Ace over the top of the music that was blaring from one corner of the café.

"Jigsaw, I didn't ask him, I guess that is what he calls my father."

"It's not a bad name," said Ace looking at me with her cold blue eyes.

"Sure it's a swell name," threw in Worm as I was just getting ready to tell them my plan.

"Never mind that right now." I was still trying to recover from Worm's bullying. "Right now you have to hear my plan. I don't know what kind of a person this night clerk might be, I mean he could be with Booboo and Henry. Here is what I thought we could do. First, just to play it safe"—Worm was getting ready to interrupt, I could see it on her face, how do you like that, she hadn't even heard my plan—"now just hold it, Worm," I said, "just hold it there a second." She gave me a puzzled expression as if she didn't know what I was talking about, but that's just like her, first she looks as if she is going to ask me a question then she comes across with this puzzled expression. "Look here, see that door over there"—both of them of course looked at the wrong door—"no, no the one that goes into the lobby, right there." Ace found it but Worm wouldn't take her eyes off the other door. "Over there, Worm, the other one, the other one."

She shot me a puzzled look again as if it was my fault, I would have liked it to be the other door, but it just wasn't. "Yeah, that's it. It goes into the lobby."

"You mean the lobby of the hotel?" asked Worm innocently. Even I didn't expect that.

"Good girl, Worm, that's really smart thinking," I said sarcastically.

"That's enough," said Ace sternly. Those two are always

sticking together. Of course I shouldn't get so mad. It was just that I was bothered because I couldn't see my father after coming all this way. People shouldn't do that to a person, anyone would act exactly the same way.

"I am sorry, Worm, yes that's the door that goes into the lobby, right into the lobby." I tried to put as much pleasantness in my voice as I could.

"Why didn't you come out through it if it's just off the lobby instead of going outside, outside is longer." Worm was just full of good questions.

"That's the beautiful part of it," I whispered to both of them. "Look, if he saw me going into the café he would know I was in here. Now do you get it?" They both of course gave me a blank face, holy Jesus these two could be slow sometimes. "What if someone was to call the hotel," I began with the most secret whisper my voice could carry, "what if this same someone was to ask for a certain Worm Bosterman who was sitting in the café next door drinking coffee, now just what would that desk clerk do?" I smiled showing them just how brilliant I could be sometimes.

"You mean," asked Ace, "get him away from the desk and as he is checking in the café, two quick and clever persons could at the same time be ready to run at top speed in the front door and up the stairs." Ace was smiling and looking at Worm as she talked so that Worm could get the whole thing mapped out for herself. "Do you know what room he is in?" she continued, looking back at me.

"When he called, he plugged the cord into 419." I had seen Flynn do exactly the same thing in a German spy picture.

Ace gave me her I-am-proud-of-you look and Worm had the damnedest grin I have ever seen in my life, she sure loved outsmarting people.



"Wait," she said with a sudden sadness, "what shall I tell him when he comes in here and asks for me?"

"Well," I said, "to make sure we don't have any trouble, you answer the phone in the lobby and talk for a while. That way you can be on the lookout, and give one bastard of a shout if he begins calling the police."

"Won't he kind of want to grab me if I shout?" asked Worm, she was trying again to find every fault with my great plan that she could.

"Of course you may have to run out after that," I said, keeping way ahead of her thinking, "and if we get separated, we will meet in the park by the fountain, you know which one I mean."

"The one on Michigan?" She almost blared it out.

"Good girl, Worm." I let her enjoy her enthusiasm. "But don't shout unless he calls the police or comes up to look around."

"Yes," said Worm, still working my plan over in her mind, "but what are you going to do if I have to shout?"

That was a good question and I had to think a moment. "Well, if you shout, Ace and I will shoot out the first fire escape we come to and meet at the fountain."

We went to the phone in front of the café and called the hotel. "The New Greater Cody Hotel, may I be of service to you," the voice said. Since when was it the New Greater Cody Hotel, they must have just added that New part since I was there last. His voice didn't even sound as if it was the same man, someone should tell him that he sounds different. I tried to make my voice as deep as I could. He told me to hold the line. As soon as I heard him go away from the switchboard, we shot out the front door of the café and into the hotel. I hoped that Worm would wait a second before she answered his paging.

## **XI**

Inside, the whole place seemed deserted. It's funny what one man can do for a beat-up old room, even if he was ducking down behind the desk I would have known it.

I could hear his voice through the open door of the café as we hurried up the stairs: "Is there a Worm Bosterman in here?" Maybe Worm was overdoing it a bit, I didn't hear her answer, but just as we shot around the corner to the second floor, I heard the desk clerk say, "Yes, young lady, telephone for you in the lobby."

I was feeling pretty cocky, the government doesn't know what they are missing by having their teachers down on me the way they are, I really would have made a great G-man.

The only trouble is, I would work for either side, that's how shot my morals are.

We stood in front of his door and I was about to knock, my clenched fist was damp, I was excited, but I didn't knock. The hallway was dark, one of the lights had burned out and I just looked at Ace's face that was now gray and shadow-covered.

"Either you knock now or you never will," she said with a concern that was out of place even for Ace.

"Yes," I answered, over the sound of my own heart doing the four-forty, "don't you think that if he wanted to see me he would have gotten hold of me some way and not just by that stupid postcard with the dumb lions on it, don't you think he would have?" I was talking myself into sadness, I was all tired out, I didn't know what to do.

"He is our only chance," she said, and not cornily as you would hear it in a movie, she said it as if she was talking about flowers, swiftly but importantly.

What kind of hope was that, I thought to myself, the only chance we had was all tied up with a man who wouldn't come out of his room, a man who drank too much, who sent me an old beat-up postcard with a couple of words and lions on the front.

"All right, let's get out of here," said Ace softly and with no reproach in her voice at all, but just as she said that or because she said that, I knocked on the door. Ace's smile was the only thing I could see on her dark face.

The door opened quickly at the first knock, as if the person who opened it was standing just on the other side, just standing in the dark room listening all the time. "What do you want?" a heavy voice said in the small slit that was hardly big enough for his eyes to look out of.

I recognized Earnie's voice right away. Most everyone thinks that colored voices all sound alike, but they don't know colored people as well as I do.

"Earnie, it's me, William, I got to see my father." I put the most determination I could in my voice.

"We ain't got no fathers today. Besides, your father was in an insane asylum and got hit by a car trying to escape."

He was about to close the door but I stuck my fingers in the opening. "Go ahead, slam it Earnie, and smash my fingers all to hell. If you want to close that door, that's how you'll have to do it." I pressed my fingers hard against the door, waiting for what I knew Earnie wouldn't do, but he was a boogie, and he might do anything just because he was scared.

"God damn it, just a minute," he said. He walked away from the little open slit and when I put pressure on the door I realized that he had the night chain on.

It seemed like a long time passed with my ear next to the door, and I could hear whispering. Earnie's footsteps came back and his dark old voice said, "Your daddy is sick and he says that you have to go away, and you are not to come back."

"If you don't open this door you black son of a bitch I will start screaming at the top of my lungs, and then all of us will be in trouble, that includes that bitch you call your mother." I didn't mean anything of what I was saying, but I knew it would make Earnie mad as hell, it might get me a hit in the mouth but he would have to open the door to do it.

"I'm not going to let you get me mad, you can't get me mad and I won't let it happen and you leave my mother out of this." He could hardly talk, he was so mad.

Ace, who had been standing a little to the right of the door, stepped closer to me so that Earnie could see her. "We have to see Mr. Noone, would you please tell him that it's important and if we don't see him the police are going to get us." Ace's voice in the hallway was the waves on Lake Michigan all over again, it was fresh and clean.

Earnie didn't say a thing, he was just gone for a second and when he came back, he told me to take my fingers out of the door and that he would open it. I did, and Earnie did, and when the door opened slowly we stepped into the dark room. The feeling jumped through me that everything would be all right and bad at the same time. I let the feeling slip by me and it disappeared out the door as Earnie closed it.

Even if I didn't know my father was there, I would have known it. It was the same smell that was in his old room back home, the same smell that was in his closet. It was the smell of whiskey and cigar smoke, and I believe my father was born with it and a hundred years from now if some grave robber were to open his grave the same smell would be there too. It was just part of him.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to Earnie who just stood in the darkness next to the door, "I didn't mean what I said."

"Someday you're going to get your head broke by all these things you don't mean." Earnie's voice was trying to be harsh and mean but he could never pull it off.

The room was dark and the only light that was there was not exactly what you could call light. It was the grayness coming from the window, it was the night coming down out of the sky and up from the Chicago street. In front of the window sat my father and he was looking out of it. He had his damn cigar all aglow in the center of his mouth. He

didn't look at me or Ace, but kept on staring out of the window. He looked big sitting in that chair, he even looked fat, the hair that was around his ears and the back of his neck was thick and long, it looked as if he had a large black hat on the back of his bald head. I stood there in the silence waiting for him to speak.

"If you say you missed me," he boomed out, moving his damn old cigar to the corner of his mouth and not taking his eyes off the Chicago skyline, "you can leave right now, I don't want any brat of your mother's telling me that he missed me."

His voice was like his broken-down old Hudson, it was creaky and out of tune but it still worked.

Now to show you how movies have affected my life, the first thing I thought of was to run over to him and kiss him on the lips and begin crying like a little girl, but Ace being there made me not do that, so I just answered, "I got your postcard."

"What postcard?" he asked, turning and looking at me for the first time.

"You know, the one with the lions on it." I wasn't crying, but the words of my voice were.

"Oh, that one," he said and though I couldn't see anything on his dark face (it was black as Earnie's because of the light from the window behind him), I think he was amused by what I said. "Who is your lady friend?" he asked, turning his head a little to look at Ace.

"It's me, Dr. Lanning's daughter, we have given up school and come all the way from Michigan to see you. Worm Bosterman is down in the lobby." Ace's voice was as calm as ever. She was like a Russian woman who has just had her twenty-fifth son, she just has it and keeps right on working in the field.

"Two more people and you would have half the damn town here. Is Tom Lanning your old man? What is the old lush doing besides burying his mistakes?" That got a chuckle out of Ace which in the darkness sounded like an ice cube hitting the side of a glass, it was even wet.

"I don't know this Worm Bosterman and anyone with a name like that should not be known anyways," he said, jiggling a little in his seat. At the same time Earnie laughed behind us.

"She's from that German family that lives on Franklin Street," I said hoping he would want to know this little piece of information.

He didn't pay any attention to what I said, he was just silent, and looking at me. "You are getting tall, boy, what have you been eating, you're skinny."

"Peanut-butter sandwiches and black coffee mostly. But we had a good meal yesterday," I added, not knowing what to say.

"Where was that?" he asked, turning his head a bit (and then toward Earnie). "Put on the light, Earn, so that I can look at one of my mistakes."

Earnie laughed, but it sounded more like a cough than a laugh, and turned on the light. The dark shadows disappeared and the room filled up with furniture and my father's old sample cases that were usually in the back seat of the Hudson when he was home. The large figure of my father sitting in the chair in front of the window even changed, the parts that in the dark I thought were the thickness of his body turned out to be his overcoat and though the room was warm, he had it buttoned right to the neck with the collar down. His face was thinner and whiter than I remembered it, though his cigar was fat and smoky as it always was. I had a feeling that Earnie was smiling behind me, but I

couldn't see him without turning around and then I would have to take my eyes off my father. If my father was sick, and he sure did not look good, I wouldn't put it past Earnie to take pride in something like that, he had flicked on the light as if he were training a spotlight on a prize freak in a freak show.

My father didn't look at me, but kept his eyes on the darkness out the window. His eyes seemed fixed on something out there on the rooftops. But Ace and I couldn't see what it was from where we were standing. I thought I caught an expression of humor about his eyes and the lower part of his mouth, he wasn't exactly smiling, it just seemed that the enjoyment on his face was a little more than the cigar he was smoking. I did think that he was not overly happy to see me, it was almost as if there was a little joke between Earnie and him and whatever he was looking at outside. I gave Ace a quick glance and for a second I thought she was smiling, but with Ace you could never be sure.

"I think it was called the Black Hawk or something like that," I said suddenly answering the question he had asked a full minute before.

"What was called the Black Hawk?" My father finally looked at me.

"The restaurant that Ace and Worm and I ate at." I felt kind of hurt that he had already forgotten what he had just asked me, after all he was the last one to do any talking in that room. You would think that he would remember what he had said, it was only a minute or so that had slipped by. But it was a funny minute. It just seemed to slip by without anyone noticing. I wanted to catch it and force it back at least into existence.



"Where do you get that kind of money?" he asked flatly yet sternly. That was a hell of a thing for my father to be saying, I had never known him or heard of him being concerned about money.

"We stuck up a bank," said Ace and she turned and started giving old Earnie the once-over; she didn't like anyone standing in back of her.

"Maybe it's the same one that wouldn't cash your check, Earn," said my father glancing at me and then back at Earnie.

"That's it, man," said Earnie laughing behind me, "you kids took all the money and didn't leave any for a perfectly good all-American check." This threw Earnie into hysterics and he sat down in a chair near the door and had laughter that just wouldn't stop.

As I said before, I knew my father wouldn't welcome me with open arms, but I didn't think he would exactly cut me off the way he was doing.

"You want to go?" asked Ace dryly. "We could get bigger laughs from Mother Booboo."

"Who is Mother Booboo?" said my father quickly, showing a little more interest.

"Oh, just a fat old spider of a woman," I answered, trying to act just as cool as Ace.

"Don't tell me that Tean Booboo is still teaching school," he snorted, slewing her first and last name together as if it were all one word, I must admit it sounded better that way. "So she still hasn't got a man," my father said with a laugh. "That old spider of a woman, as you call her, was damn fine-looking once. When I knew her, she told me that she was the only woman who hadn't sold out."

"That's because she had nothing to sell," put in Ace, but

without showing any particular interest in the conversation.

"I like your little lady friend, William," said my father seriously, "but she talks a little too much."

That got Ace, I knew if anyone could it would be my old man. Her face broke into a great big go-to-hell smile. Here she had hardly said a dozen words since we got there and the first time my dad spoke to her he broke her up.

"Aren't you sort of curious what we are doing here?" I asked impatiently, wanting to tell him the whole story about us giving up our education and my quitting school for about the sixth time.

"I figured if you wanted to tell me you would," he said, shaking a white ash off his overcoat. It looked like the pollen of a flower or a butterfly, but my dad told me once that's the way you can tell a cheap cigar from an expensive one. I was more curious about his overcoat and why he was sitting up in his room all this time than about anything else, but it didn't seem to bother Ace, she took it as the most natural thing in the world.

"Have you been sick or something?" I asked, trying to keep him talking.

"Yes, you could say that in a way I have been sick, but if you mean my coat, no." He looked at me from his chair and though there was a smile on his lips, there was a cold hard glassy look in his eyes. I marked it off to the whiskey he had been drinking and that and nothing more.

"Do you know what the trouble is," he continued, looking around the room, and I said softly no, but it wasn't meant for anyone to hear, "the trouble is"—and again a moment of silence, a moment long enough for me to glance at Ace who only glanced back at me, a moment to see what Earnie was up to, and all this was done with me hardly tak-

ing my eyes off my father—"this hotel doesn't have enough chairs. I don't like looking up to people when I am talking to them, why don't you two sit on the bed where I can get a look at you." I could tell that he had meant to say something else but it got lost somewhere, drowned and buried in the secret working of his whiskey-filled mind.

Ace and I sat down on the bed and I could now see out the window. All that was there was the massive skyline of the huge Chicago buildings, some lights were blinking on and off, flickering like so many stars, there were clouds and the moon and it was difficult to see where the buildings ended and the sky began. It all seemed together and apart at the same time, if such a thing is possible and from that window it sure looked like it could be.

When I turned my eyes back to the room, my father had moved. He had got up and gone over to the small chest of drawers and opened the top one. He took out some money and gave it to Earnie and said something to him that made Earnie agree and smile. I think he was sending him out for something to drink and maybe some more smokes. I don't think my father was drunk but I could see by the almost empty bottle on the nightstand that he and Earnie had probably been tossing them down most of the day. He glanced at his reflection in the window and asked me how I liked that damn old overcoat. I told him that it was real fine but why wear it indoors and all he said was, why not, so I could have saved myself the question. He said a second later that he liked it and that answer was the best of the two so I took it.

In the meantime, Earnie had put on a lightweight jacket and left. He sort of slipped out of the half-open door. I don't know why he didn't open it all the way and walk out like

a normal human being but that was Earnie, he was full of cloak-and-dagger stuff. I think that my father sent Earnie out more to get rid of him than anything else, so that he could talk. There was something about Earnie being there that made it impossible, because you might talk over his head and you didn't want to hurt his feelings.

## XII

“Now,” began my father, sitting down in his chair again and trying to puff on his dead cigar, “what is this all about?” His whole manner seemed to change, not that he was serious or anything like that, it was just that he was different. Before you couldn’t talk to him but now you could. Could one old boogie make all that difference, I wondered to myself as my father continued.

“First off, you are through with school. Good, I’m glad to hear it. The only thing that school ever taught you was how to be sneaky and that is just a reaction to their general trickery, so they can’t even take credit for that.” My father stopped here for no particular reason other than perhaps to glance at Ace.

"I don't know what to tell you, or if I did know what to tell you, I don't see why you would bother to listen to me, just like you don't seem to bother to listen to any adult. And maybe you shouldn't. But you can tell me what happened back there and I can tell you what I would have done when I was your age, and what I would do now."

"You mean it's not the same?" I broke in, surprised and childishly.

"No, it's not at all the same." He relit his dead cigar. I could see the reflection in the dark window, his big head looming against the background of the whole city, and the glow from his cigar, a firefly floating over the million other lights that were silent and still. I didn't know what to say, I just kept staring at his reflection.

"What do we have to tell you?" Ace suddenly said bitterly. "Didn't you send William that postcard? Was there some joke behind it? Well, tell it to Booboo, she'll laugh, I am going to get Worm and we'll all get out of here." She stood up from the bed and headed toward the door like a steam-roller, it didn't look like anything was going to stop her.

"What the hell do you want me to tell you, Ace," my father shouted back, "do you want me to tell you a pack of lies like everyone else?"

Old Ace stopped dead in her tracks and turned around and stared at my father. There was something in her eyes that glittered and then was gone, it probably was just the reflection of the bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

"Yeah, I sent William that postcard, and I also left home. You can fit those two things together if you try. Now I'll call down and see about, about—what the hell is her name?" He shook his head as if he knew her name but was doing his best to forget it.

"Worm," I said. But my father didn't seem to want to look at me.

"Sit down, Ace, and I'll get hold of your lady friend and we'll see what happens." Ace came back and sat down again next to me, she wasn't sad or hurt, she just looked mad and ready to jump my father and kill him with her eyes, they sure looked hard.

My dad picked up the telephone and waited for a second. Even by the bed I could hear the phone buzzing the switchboard.

"Say—yeah, good, and you—say, Junior, is there a young lady talking on the lobby phone?"

There was a moment or two of silence while the man on the other end talked. His voice sounded like a tiny snake hissing and burping. My dad broke out laughing and looked at us sitting together on his bed.

"O.K.," he said. His eyes were still more on Ace than me. That was bothering me. He was my dad and not Ace's, but maybe he thought that Ace was a little worse off than me, after all she was a girl. Me, I could always hop a freight up to Canada and get in touch with a few Eskimos or go out west and work on the King Ranch with Mexicans. I would even run away to sea but you can't run away to sea any more because of the unions, those bastards are ruining everything.

My father hung up the phone and went back to his chair. "Your little Worm sounds like she knows more than both of you put together."

"Is she still on the phone?" I asked hoping that my plan was going O.K.

"No," my father snickered, "Junior started getting suspicious when she ran out of conversation and began talk-

ing about batting averages. If there is anything Junior loves in this world, it's batting averages, he loves it almost as much as he loves listening in on other people's phone conversations. Worm said something into the phone about Ted Williams and old Junior corrected her over the switchboard. Both of them are down there now arguing on the phone about Ted Williams. Junior says she doesn't want to come up."

This got a little suspicious snicker out of Ace, who was still staring at the side of my father's face. He was looking out the window again. That's just like Worm, I thought, she probably figured it was part of my great plan. Of course, if it had been the Gestapo we would all be in jail right now but those things don't bother Worm. I remember one time we saw a guy get run over by a car and he lay there while the ambulance came screaming around the corner. You'd think Worm wouldn't want to see a man all messed up, but she walked right up to him and looked down at him and she waved at him like a baby does when it learns to say bye-bye. But what shocked me most about the whole thing was that the damn guy waved back. I tell you, that girl makes friends the strangest ways.

Adults don't often hurt my feelings, but my dad was, here I had come all this way to see him and what does he do, he acts as if I am not even on the face of the earth. I am not for sentiment but holy God, he could at least slam me one in the stomach, anything just to let me know he's thinking about me.

My dad turned around and looked at me as if he were reading my mind. "What are you so silent about?" he asked threateningly.

"About you." My words sounded like a confession to a priest.



"Well, I didn't give you permission to think about me. I suppose your mother has told you how no-good I am."

"No," I answered, "she said that you didn't like me because I was named after the William that died." I shouldn't have said that but I was too scared to say anything else. Without realizing what I was doing, I burst out, "Was that who the postcard was for, *him*?" Son of a bitch, my eyes were getting bleary.

I saw the dark smear of his body rise, it filled the room, it covered the light. I honestly expected a slap. He sat down next to me and the mattress went down with the weight of his huge body.

"Honey, it was for you." His heavy hand lay on top of my head. "Why? Because I believe in the infinitude of your possibilities. . . ."

He stopped suddenly and it seemed as if he would never say another word. I didn't understand what he had said. But there was something about his expression that made me think he was joking.

"Maybe I will go and get Worm," said Ace, out of concern for the touchy moment. But that's how she is. She will have nothing to do with serious conversation and most of the time I agreed with her but I thought this was different.

"Ace, we got to do something, we have to. You know that, Ace." I felt wrong talking to Ace that way but what else could I do?

"Yes, doll," said my old man, "don't forget you took off too. Maybe the cops are looking for the whole bunch of you. I am not going to talk you into going back. I am not going to talk you into anything. Do you think William would have come to see me if he thought that I was another Booboo?"

"That's true," I added hopefully, "don't forget he sent me

that postcard with the lions on it, you're forgetting that, Ace." She looked at me as if I was trying to hurt her feelings. But she sat there on the bed next to me, and maybe she thought that for the first time in her whole life she should listen to me.

"Dad, I don't know how to tell you. Maybe I could write it on a postcard and slip it under your door or tell it to Earnie and let him tell it to you in his old darkie fashion. I can talk to him sometimes, and then sometimes he seems to be getting just like the rest, maybe someday he will be a teacher just like Miss Booboo and Mr. Henry. I get bad marks just to show them I can't stand them."

I was getting mad and when I am mad it's impossible for me to make sense. "You, Ace, you can." I looked at Ace quickly.

"Sure, it's easy," she said blandly. "We want something that isn't a pack of lies. But there is nothing we can do about it, nothing your father can do about it. It's everything we have always felt about, it's those wood carvings of Mr. Huntington and especially the one you like best of all, your white butterfly with the sleepy eyes, it's *The Red Shoes*, it's all of that, and it would be just like Mother Booboo to talk about it, just like Mr. Henry to agree with her, and there, that's all."

She stopped, her expression hadn't changed the whole time she was talking, she looked right at my father as if she was going to get up and mash his cigar in his face. My father's cigar had gone out again and he relit it and his reflection lit up too. All of us sat around waiting for somebody to say something, but no one did. I think we were all too busy watching the reflection of my father in the window, he most of all.

"Well," he said after a couple hundred years of puffing on his cigar, "we could open a cat house on the West Coast."

Ace was the first one to blast out with a laugh, and I followed her, and my dad even gave out with an almost proud smile, with his beat-up overcoat looking like it belonged to a general. He refolded his legs and stared out of the window again. It looked as if he was talking to his own reflection.

"Your problem has nothing to do with your bad marks. It has nothing to do with the fact that none of you gets along with the rest and that you're what your teachers call troublemakers. Grownups don't have a monopoly on anything and least of all a correct way to live. They just have certain patterns of living and they don't want you to interrupt them. It's hard and they are not going to give in and sure as hell you are not going to. Maybe there is no answer, maybe it can never be solved, there must be some problems that people can't work their way through.

"They insist you subordinate yourselves to them, if only because of age. And whether you know it or not, you are in that subordinate position, if only because everyone wants it that way. It all comes down to this, either you live their way or not at all. It's that big an issue and you can't laugh it off and you can't ignore it, because they will throw it in your face as long as they can. They won't let you alone. So finally it has nothing to do with justice or fairness. It's not a question of right or wrong."

"Maybe if you came back," I said, interrupting him, "if you came with us, everything would be all right." He shook his large head as if my question was fighting him inside it.

"No, I can't face them for you, maybe I can't even tell

you how to face them. The only avenue open for you is to go back. Sooner or later they would bring you back, if necessary by force. There's no halfway house about it and people who think there is are just lying to themselves.

"Don't give up your sneakiness or your cunning. Those are the only weapons you have and they know that, and they are going to disarm you if they can. They will try to disarm you with a horrible collection of unworkable clichés, they are not above trying kindness or even love, but those words are flip-flop in their minds and they don't have the same meaning that you have for them. They will try to make you ashamed because you are different and maybe stronger and maybe even wiser.

"When you think of how much abuse has been dealt out, not only to you, but to the whole world of people that can be pushed around, my God what our present society must have cost. You never see it on the surface, it's the quiet assassination, the slaying in secret. Every poor little bastard that can't keep up in school, all the kids that fight back by beating up each other, and their teachers, and anyone else that gets in their way. They wonder why you are dropping out of school, they blame your homelife. Will they ever take the blame themselves?

"There's another issue besides all this. It's your heart and your youth, and they are out to get it." He stopped for a moment and looked into our faces. I think he had decided that we were not understanding anything he was saying. His face just looked at us for a moment as if he knew it was pointless to continue. I wanted so badly to let him know that we were not complete idiots like I am sure he thought all children were.

"Yes," I said, almost hurt, as if someone were picking on

me. "People are always throwing around those phrases about Mark Twain and how he thought it was a pity to waste youth on children."

He gave me a little smile as if he understood what I was trying to do and asked, "Did Twain say that? So they're still quoting those old phrases to you. You'd think they would have found something new by now. I had to listen to that nonsense too, when I was a kid. They told me that Twain said when he was sixteen he thought adults were stupid and he was very much surprised when he got to be twenty how wise they had become, or some jazz like that. Well, my parents are both dead and I still think they were stupid.

"Maybe this is just another damn speech, like Miss Boo-boo. If it's difficult for you to talk about it, you might realize it is impossible for me. Probably Worm could explain it better to all of us."

I was the only one of the three of us to smile. It was long like a speech, but I felt that he was trying to help us through. Ace kept her eyes fixed on him and they were now toned down to a soft blue.

"Yes, it's all their fault," I said, "but—"

"No, it's not," he interrupted, without looking at me. "I don't completely exonerate you little fiends. You can't push all this off on your parents. Of course they try to possess you, try to hold you, for God's sake what else do you expect them to do? You're flesh of their flesh. You should have the tolerance and the understanding because it is they who are standing on all the cliffs. But you can't.

"What you want is reasonable enough, you just want your youth and freedom and a chance to rip the living hell out of life. You want to taste and feel and possess everything at the same time. Sure youth is a blunder, sure it's wasted

on children. Well, that is how it should be. Youth is an infatuation with itself and the gaudy display of the world.

"I laugh when I see the old look around and talk about how youth is blundering. They forget that they blundered the same way when they were young and they think they know now what roads to take. That's the very line of demarcation between youth and old age, between life and death. That's the true horror of age and dying, there is nothing that interests you any longer, nothing to fight. It's cold deadly absolute order that we should despise, when it comes the world ends."

He stopped talking, and for some reason I could not look him in the face. I felt myself being taken over, as if I could no longer control what was inside me, I suppose it would be the same feeling that Cobb got when he realized that he was getting old and other players never as good as he were beating him, or like in the movie *The Red Shoes*, after the dancer had died, her manager just stood helpless with his fist raised and shaking. I honestly didn't believe that my father was glad that I had come, and that was bothering me more than anything, I wanted to run to the phone, and talk to Worm about baseball, I wanted to hit and beat and rip all over again.

I noticed that my father's lips were moving but my mind forgot to tell my ears to listen. I forced them to listen as he started to speak again.

"Maybe you don't understand what I'm talking about and maybe it doesn't matter. I might even be wrong, but I wouldn't admit it, and there's an honest statement for you. So you see I can't be all that wrong. Most of it fits together, all the ends seem to tie up in a fancy red bow. There is nothing that says you have to listen to me, and I

will tell you myself that if I were your age I wouldn't listen to anyone that talked so much."

"But, Father—" I was trying to interrupt him, but he didn't let me. I think he had a feeling that if he let me talk he'd break down and say something that would hurt me even more.

His voice raised just a pitch. "You can't stay with me, and if that sounds harsh, I'm sorry. I won't go back to living the way I used to. I am not a father and I don't want to be and it's one of the reasons I left. Maybe that's cruel to you now, but it would be much more cruel if I came back."

He stopped talking as quickly as he had begun. He stubbed out his cigar that was not lit anyway and stood up. His long overcoat almost covered all of him. He still looked to me like a general even with the white ashes on his coat collar. He walked swiftly toward the bathroom and would have walked right in without another word if I hadn't stopped him.

"But what are you going to do, Father?" I asked with my mouth full of choky chunky words.

"Me," he said, throwing his hands and shoulders up in a huge shrug. The shrug itself said I don't know or care. "I am going to do what every sensible old man should do. I am going to buy myself a yellow canary and take him out each morning before the sun rises for a long, long walk."

With this he closed the bathroom door and was gone. He was right, I didn't understand half of what he had said and I don't think Ace did either. "Well, what do you think," I said to Ace who was looking out the dark window. She didn't hear me so I said it again. "What do you think, Ace, are we going back or shall we still go out West?" She finally looked at me with a broken-up smile. "What are you going

to do?" she asked softly. I didn't answer her because just then Earnie came in with a big bag, and he made enough noise to drown out any answer I might have made.

"Where is Mr. Noone?" he asked, looking around the room.

"In there." I pointed to the bathroom. He walked right in without even knocking.

"Maybe we had better get Worm and see about some tickets," said Ace coldly.

"Yes. I should tell him that I am leaving." It was more of a question than anything else.

"I don't think he wants you to, baby," she said to me quietly, with the damndest kindest tone I ever heard coming from her.

As we closed the hall door I could hear the rustle of Earnie's bag and the sound of glass coming from the bathroom.